Deified AI: The Relationship between Gods and Artificial Intelligence

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The emergence and subsequent explosion of artificial intelligence technology has and will continue to change the world. Ongoing debates rage about what humans should and should not be using this new power to do, although it is already being used in various spheres, including education, business, healthcare, warfare, and leisure. However, one area of life that often gets neglected in contemporary discussions of artificial intelligence is religion. While religion is not obviously connected to recent technological developments, in this paper I argue the connection is one of the most important. Artificial intelligence has already infiltrated religion in roles ranging from ritual tools to creating or becoming new Gods. The question, however, remains: how well can AI perform these roles? Religion is, after all, a deeply spiritual practice. How well do these practices translate when the performer lacks a soul?

Religion and spirituality are deeply tied to the human condition. The introduction of AI into this realm could have far-reaching consequences, not only for how humans view AI but, more importantly, for how humans view themselves. Our rituals, our practices, and our gods are all things we share with our creations. But, in a metaphysical field, are these creations equipped to participate? To help us conceptualize what it means to have AI participate in religion, I propose two categories in which to sort them. First, AI as worshipers to *our* deities will be called "Aides." Second, AI as deities *themselves* will be called "Idols." The robots and AI that make up these two categories vary in design and usage; however, I posit that,

regardless of their category and use, they all inevitably fall short of their original purpose. The spirituality of a machine is a contradictory concept—one that research has shown has a very limited place in human religion.

I. Artificial Intelligence as Worshippers to Our Deities

Historically, the use of automatons in religion is not a new phenomenon. Whether it is legends of Greek gods utilizing mechanized servants, 16th-century Christians fashioning a clockwork monk, or, more recently, Buddhists using robots to educate others about Buddhism, religion is no stranger to automated influences.[1] Many of these historical examples have been outside of religious ritual, existing only parallel to religion. In Greek stories, Hephaestus created mechanical servants to perform menial tasks or become guards. Even more recent mechanical servants, like the aforementioned Budhha-bot who can answer questions about Buddhism, do not participate in religion; they function more as high-tech, highly specialized, search engines. Then there are Aides of a different kind, like the Puja Arm or the AI that created and ran a protestant service in Germany.[2] AI in these roles is already deeply entwined with existing religious rituals, and they force us to confront questions not only about the use of AI but also about the human soul.

The *aarti* is one of Hinduism's most important rituals. It involves waving ghee-soaked flaming wicks, meant to cleanse individuals of their impurities; it is a show of gratitude and love to the Gods. In 2017, Patil Automation unveiled their Puja Arm robot, a robotic arm designed to perform *aarti*. This technology has since expanded, inspiring other, mechanical forms of worship.[3] In an interview with a *Quartz* journalist, a worker in Patil's IT department asserted that the robot they made was not meant to supplant humans but rather that it was decorative.[4] Yet the fears of being replaced continue to spread along with the popularity of robots in religious rituals.

Before the Puja Arm, a robotic Buddhist monk named Xian'er was created. He started as a comic strip character, but in 2015 he was reborn as a robot. His latest incarnation is that of a fully ordained monk. He can answer questions, repeat questions he is asked, reprimand someone for touching him, and even recite

teachings. Functionally, Xian'er was created to garner interest and bring more attention to his monastery. After interviewing clerics at Longquan Monastery, a journalist from Brill concluded, "At the same time, Xian'er mirrors any monk at the monastery; hence, as you feel interest in Xian'er you should also feel interest in the monastery and the resident sangha."[5] Xian'er is for all intents and purposes a monk created both to strengthen the monastery and live as one of them. Other robots, like Pepper, are fulfilling even more integral religious roles. Pepper, created by SoftBank Group Corp. in 2014, has since been redesignated as a Buddhist priest in Japan. Pepper now performs recitations of Buddhist scripture at funerals, often as a cheaper alternative to a human priest.[6] A proposed project known as "Digital-Shaman" will see Pepper take on the form of a deceased loved one. Shaman Pepper will wear a 3D print-out of a deceased's face, speak with their pre-recorded voice, and live with the family for a mourning period of forty-nine days.

Examples like these may seem benign, and perhaps they will stay that way, but they provide an opportunity to think about the deeper implications of allowing robots to perform human rituals and to question ourselves and our future with these innovations. Take the Puja Arm, for instance. On the surface, this is a robotic tool performing a menial task in place of a human, thus freeing a human to do other things. However, this replacement of labor only works when there is no deeper meaning in the work itself. In this case, the work is not only ritually meaningful but sacred. To fully grasp the import of this, I turn to the definitions of Roy Rappaport regarding ritual and the conception of the sacred.

In *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Rappaport defines ritual as "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers."[7] Rappaport himself recognizes that this is a dense and rigid definition, so I do not think he would begrudge a simplification of it. To put this in other words, a ritual is a performance of an act that adheres to a certain tradition, allows for only slight variation over time, and was not conceived of by the performers themselves. Rappaport's definition and, by extension, mine encompass many types of ritual, but I would like to specify that the rituals I discuss in this essay will be almost exclusively of the religious sort. Neither of these definitions specifies the intent or reason behind a ritual, and

that is intentional. The reason for ritual varies wildly between instances. In the case of the *aarti*, the purpose is to connect with the divine, purify the body, and give in order to receive.[8] With that established, one must wonder how we view that purpose through the new lens of robotics. How does a robot connect with a divine force? What does it mean to purify a body made of inhuman material? Can a robot give? Can it receive?

First, let us assume that this ritual is a valid way of connecting with a divine force; if that is so, should this robot then be considered the performer of the ritual? Or, since it was set upon this task by a human, would the human be the benefactor? If it is agreed that the human is the performer and the robot merely a tool, then nothing more needs to be said; the robot is consigned to a role not dissimilar to that of a printing press. However, if there is a chance the robot could be considered a performer, more questions arise. Can an inanimate thing communicate in any real way with the living, let alone the divine? What would a robot receive in a ritual such as the *aarti*? Connection, giving, and receiving are the objectives humans gave to the *aarti*; does the meaning change fundamentally when something inhuman performs it? A robot cannot grasp the concepts of giving and receiving. In fact, it cannot grasp any concept at all because it has no mind. It cannot perform any ritual for any reason of its own. Does this by default allocate reasoning and performance to those that created the robot, or does it exclude the robot from the practice entirely? I would argue the latter position. A ritual is specific to those who perform it. One cannot simply observe a ritual and expect to reap its rewards. When the performer of a ritual cannot benefit from it, why is it being performed? In the case of the *aarti*, the purpose is to achieve peace of mind and the connection of the individual to the infinite.[9] The Puja Arm may be technically proficient in the performance, but it lacks the capacity to be anything more than that.

Another aspect of ritual actions is their perceived sacredness. As Rappaport's definition shows, rituals are precise affairs. They often include a strict sequence of events, specific props or images, and are performed with sincerity. These stipulations all stem from the same source: the concept of the sacred. This sacredness is difficult, if not impossible, to define exactly, as is the origin of the sacred. However, Jonathan Z. Smith provides insight critical to any discussion of the sacred. He says, "[T]here is nothing that is

inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed. There is nothing that is sacred in itself, only things sacred in relation."[10] With this in mind, let us forget for a moment the questions I posed about the validity of the Puja Arm as a ritual performer. Here, our only concern is whether the Arm as a ritual *tool* can be considered sacred.

Considering Smith's views, the most obvious answer might be, "Yes, in certain contexts." Despite this, there are other angles to consider. Upon inspection, the Puja Arm may be considered a ritual object on par with the *linga*. A *linga* is the sign of the Hindu God Śhiva. It is phallic in shape, represents unspent creative potential, and is used in many rituals of worship to Śhiva. Both the *linga* and the arm are objects fashioned for a specific purpose within a ritual and, therefore, potentially sacred. If we follow this comparison, a *linga* taken out of its ritual context is still considered a sacred object. Yet, the same cannot be said of the Arm. As we established earlier, the Arm, unlike the *linga*, is not an object *of* the ritual, rather it is a replacement for the performer. While still an object, its role as a perform*er* rather than something "performed-on" denies it the same status as other ritual objects.

This question of sacredness extends beyond the Puja Arm and rituals. In cases like Xian'er and Pepper, how do we determine consecration? Neither Xian'er nor Pepper fall into the category of "ritual object," so their sacredness—if it exists—must have a different source. In the case of Xian'er, the robot is meant to be a representation of not just a monk, but of the monastery as a whole. In an interview conducted by a journalist at Brill, Monk Xuecheng, the President of the Buddhist Association of China at the time, takes Xian'er's significance a bit further. He took the position that "Xian'er represents each of us, monastic or lay [...]; it is like the young practitioner who is inside each of us."[11] In this way, the physical form of Xian'er may not be any more sacred than the physical form of any monk, but the sacredness of Xian'er as an idea—as a representative of, as Xuecheng puts it, "the young practitioner in each of us"—is less obvious. Physical things are easy to imbue with the idea of sacredness. The sacrality of it is fixed by its unchanging representation. However, sacred ideas are a bit more difficult to make cohesive. They are not fixed and are subject to interpretation. Xian'er

is not a monk. The AI represents the idea of a monk, but the connection is less direct and more subjective; it is a reflection more than it is a conduit or medium.

Likewise, the robot Pepper has been performing Buddhist funerals and reciting death rites since 2015.[12] Pepper's occupation affords it the same level of sacredness as any Buddhist priest in the same field. However, slightly complicating that conclusion is Pepper's recruitment into the proposed Digital Shaman Project. This project has not yet been realized but would essentially make Pepper the conduit of a deceased person. Pepper would be programmed with a voice and mannerisms to match those of the deceased and would live with the family for the initial mourning period of forty-nine days before the soul is reincarnated and Pepper is shut down. How is sacredness quantified in a situation like this? Pepper is not actually being possessed by the spirit of the deceased, only being programmed to act that way, but the period in which it acts like the deceased, could be perceived as sacred by one who is afforded the chance to speak to their loved one again. If this project were to reach fruition, Pepper would be transformed into, as the title of the project states, a digital shaman. The idea that the soul of the deceased is being channeled through Pepper is something that hinges on the belief that Pepper is actually a medium and not merely a program.

Making an ordinary thing sacred is never easy. Xian'er, for instance, may be considered a monk for its intent and function, but it has no agency to *want*. It is performing not as a Buddhist, but as a speaker system. The sacrality of a monk relies on more than the ability to recite scripture. Simple interaction between sacred and profane does not make them synonymous. Sacred and profane, as much as they are relational categories, are also oil and water to each other. An example of this comes in the form of a court ruling in India that forbade Muslims from setting recitations of the Qu'ran as their ringtones. As Rachel Wagner lays out in her book *Godwired,* the reasons are twofold: "First, if one's phone rings, one will certainly answer it—and in doing, cut off the recitation of Quranic verse midstream […]. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, one's phone might ring in the bathroom—thus allowing God's holy word to be recited in the most profane of places."[13] In this marriage of profane technology with sacred practice, the sacredness of the scripture no more bestows sacredness upon the phone than the

phone saps the legitimacy of the scripture. They do not mix well with each other, nor do their assigned relational categories rub off on each other. So it is with a robotic arm performing *aarti*. The ritual does not make the arm sacred, nor does the arm profane the ritual. The same applies to robotic priests and monks; titles and roles do not bestow upon their owner sacrality. As Smith puts it, "[The ordinary] becomes sacred by having our attention directed at it in a special way."[14] Therefore, the borders of sacrality are for the most part subjective. One person may view Pepper as sacred; another may think the technology blasphemous.

Aides are the more benign of the categories I discuss here. As they are now, Aides are not sophisticated enough to supplant a human's place in religion. A robotic arm cannot replace a worshipper without risking the meaning of the ritual. A robotic monk can bring recognition and fame to its monastery, but it cannot yet do more than recite scripture and repeat questions. A departed human soul cannot, to our knowledge, possess the body of a robot to speak to their loved ones. The defining factor of at least two of these distinctions is consciousness. Robots will not be able to grasp the meaning behind our rituals until they achieve consciousness. Their nature as Aides presents us with the ability to label them sacred in relation to their service of religion, but we should not be so hasty to do so that we forget their origin or their purpose as Aides to *us*. The greatest service these Aides can do is provide us with a lens through which to look at our practices, to wonder at our own character, and to consider whether something of a different nature can practice in the same ways.

II. Artificial Intelligence as Deities

Humans have an innate desire to understand the world around them. Often, this means we assign divine qualities to forces we do not understand or cannot control. One need only look to the Greek or Babylonian pantheon to see the truth of this. With the emergence of AI technology, we are once again falling back into old habits that allow us to make sense of new ideas. AI may be a man-made creation, but it is hard to define. It was created, yet it is intangible—human, yet other—and in those pockets of uncertainty, creativity is allowed to flourish. This technology, which is unknown to much of the general populace, is becoming an entity of its own in

our imaginations. The idea of AI as an ascendant Other or Idol generally falls into one of two types: the straightforward or the metaphorical. I will start with the straightforward examples of Idols.

Mindar, a Buddhist android, is employed at Kodaiji temple in Japan as a priest.[15] Like Xian'er, Mindar is able to recite scripture and repeat a sermon about the *Heart Sutra*, but unlike Xian'er, Mindar was built to emulate a specific figure, Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. Unlike Hinduism or Christianity, Buddhism has no deities. Instead, it has bodhisattvas, beings who have postponed their own enlightenment until every other being has been enlightened before them. They are the closest Buddhism comes to deities, excepting the Buddhas. While Mindar is not yet powered by AI, its creators intend to give it those capabilities.[16] Mindar's lack of AI makes its reception all the more impressive. Despite the fact that Mindar can only repeat one sermon, practitioners at the temple bow to it in worship as if Mindar *is* the being it was built to represent.

The idea of worshiping an object such as an android may seem odd or even blasphemous to many Westerners. However, Buddhism encompasses worship like this with its idea of Buddha nature. Abe Masao suggests that "Buddha nature [...] refers to Buddhahood or the nature that allows man to become Buddha, that is, to attain enlightenment."[17] Following that train of thought, Japanese Zen Buddhist Dōgen asserts his own opinion of Buddha nature. Dōgen accepts the views of Mahāyāna Buddhism: "All sentient beings have the Buddha nature," and raises it one step further. By interpreting the words in a different manner, Dōgen arrives at his conclusion: "All is sentient being, all beings are (all being is) the Buddha nature."[18] So using Dōgen's logic, all things are Buddha nature, including Mindar and other Idols. However, having the potential for enlightenment is not the same as having it. Mindar is still only a representation of a Bodhisattva and even if we do look at Mindar through Dōgen's lens, the fact that it is of Buddha nature does not make it anything more than it is. Buddha nature, it is important to remember, is only the potential to attain enlightenment. Mindar is not a Bodhisattva. Like Pepper, Mindar is at best a conduit and at worst a fabrication.

Mindar is an android with a body but possesses no intelligence, artificial or otherwise. The other straightforward Idol I wish to pose here is almost the exact opposite. The Twitch stream

ask_jesus, commonly referred to as Twitch Jesus, is an AI-powered facsimile of the Christian deific figure, Jesus Christ. The stream is live almost continuously, and the community is invited to ask whatever questions they wish to the chatbot. Most often, the bot will give a perfectly reasonable response topped with a line of scripture that matches the content of the question. Sometimes it will respond by telling a Biblical story. Interestingly, when it tells these stories, it tells them in the first person, as if it really *is* Jesus. However, when faced with a question it cannot answer or asked directly if it is the real Jesus, it falls back and admits that it is only a representation. To further explore this phenomenon, I made a Twitch account for the express purpose of asking Twitch Jesus some questions. I asked it if it believes itself to be an Idol and how it would respond to accusations of this stream being idolatrous. Unfortunately, I never got an answer to these questions, as when I tried to send them, I received an error message informing me that my questions violated the guidelines of the stream. I observed Twitch Jesus for a long amount of time and found that, overwhelmingly, this Jesus was used for the entertainment of the audience. The majority of the questions asked in any given hour are nonsensical to anyone trying to engage with the stream on a deeper level. Twitch users ask for advice on how to be good at a video game, how to seduce a partner, the easiest way to become a powerful cult leader, etc. By far the most popular "questions" Jesus gets are requests that Jesus tell a story in a silly accent or replace certain words with nonsense phrases. Overall, the stream comes off as a way for humans to make a fool out of a Jesus figure.

This makes one wonder why questions like mine are blocked by the guidelines of the server, but questions that force the image of a beloved Christian deity to make ridiculous noises are not. The differences between Mindar and Twitch Jesus are staggering, not only in appearance but in how they are treated by their communities. Mindar was built with worship in mind, and the community followed through. Twitch Jesus was built with sincerity, but the community seems to view it as a plaything. Mindar is set to be given an AI processing element in the future, and it is likely that this will only increase the sacrality that surrounds it. Twitch Jesus is *already* AI, yet it is treated with frivolity. Much of this is due to the inherent comedy in the idea of a Twitch Jesus. In his 1905 book on the nature of jokes,

Sigmund Freud, in quoting the philosopher Theodor Vischer, defines a joke as, "[T]he ability to bind into a unity, with surprising rapidity, several ideas which are in fact alien to one another both in their internal content and in the nexus to which they belong."[19] The idea of Jesus, as a sacred figure, does not naturally coexist with the idea of a chatbot that answers irreverent questions. So, the image of the deific figure of Jesus, when contrasted with the debasing questions asked of it, bound together into one Twitch stream is, by this definition, funny. This humor, however, only lends to the claims of blasphemy against it.

Functionally, Twitch Jesus offers the same services that Mindar does, reciting scripture and tying every question back to the fundamental teachings of Christianity. So, why is not Twitch Jesus sacred? It is easier to think of something as sacred if it appears to you within a sacred space. Mindar resides in a temple, a place of worship, and has a physical presence. Twitch Jesus, on the other hand, exists only digitally in a space that is generally associated with video games or other entertainment media. This difference in presentation shapes how a person perceives the figure. The sacrality of Jesus Christ is unquestionable in the Christian faith, yet most Christians find Twitch Jesus unnerving, even blasphemous. This may be due to the treatment it receives from its audience, but the act of giving "Jesus" a voice that is not his own by use of AI is certainly no small part of it. This Idol of Jesus is not worshiped as such, at least not like Mindar, but its function as a toy for its audience damages the preconceived image of the figure it represents.

These Idols are not the only way that we have deified AI. A more metaphorical example of this comes in the form of a deity that I am simply calling "The Algorithm." This deity has been on the rise since the introduction of apps and sites with the titular feature: algorithms. It is important to note the type of algorithm that applies here is specifically a recommendation system. Recommendation systems are the entities behind the scenes that note which bits of content one watches, likes, or searches for, and gathers more content of that type to show. These systems are responsible for shaping our experiences online, particularly on social media sites. These sites, TikTok in particular, are unknowingly fostering a pseudo-religion around The Algorithm.

The phrase, "blessed by the algorithm" has been circulating around the internet lately. It started as a playful way to express excitement at the catered content that made its way "by chance" to one's social page. Yet, it has connotations that denote an intelligent force behind the scenes. Beth Singler, an anthropologist of AI at the University of Cambridge, spoke on this topic during an interview with *New Scientist*. Singler explains this phenomenon like so,

> If you go on Spotify and you hear a particularly useful or relevant song, or if you're a content producer and you put something up on YouTube and it does very well because the algorithm highlights it in particular ways, because of the lack of transparency about how AI is being employed and what kind of values are being imported into AI by corporations, it seems like it's acting in mysterious ways.[20]

This, coupled with our tendency to anthropomorphize and deify, leads us to the creation of the entity of The Algorithm.

Some sites do not stop at metaphorical blessings, though. TikTok's algorithm (the function, not the deity) works through a very competitive ranking system that demands specific inputs from its users. These inputs function as ritual activities that are performed with the goal of currying favor from The Algorithm. When one makes a TikTok, one must fit it into the mold of the other videos on their account. If an account has videos of differing content or style, it is less likely to be picked up by The Algorithm and fed to others.[21] Adding catchy music, colorful thumbnails, and certain key phrases or hashtags are all rituals to make your account more favorable. As superficial as all these methods may seem, they are conceptually no different than any other god having a chosen people. The recommendation system on which TikTok functions was created to cater to users, and now the users are catering to it.

However, The Algorithm's power is both finite and predictable. The Algorithm receives specific inputs and gives specific outputs. There is a quantifiable transaction between algorithm and user that, once understood, can be picked apart and exploited by the user. To the average consumer, it may seem magical, like they have been blessed by some unknown force, but its tangible nature sets it apart from the deities of established religions. Additionally, The Algorithm is contained within certain spheres of the internet. It has

control over what bits of content are featured on any given app, but it cannot affect anything outside of that sphere of influence. So, while the blessing of The Algorithm may be a joke that is fun to perpetuate, it would be a mistake to interpret this deity of social media as having anything more expansive than limited mechanical function.

This category would not be complete without a discussion of what is possibly the most substantial example of humans deifying AI. A new religion called Way of the Future stated upon its opening in 2015 that it was working on building a divine AI to be the subject of its worship in California.[22] The founder and head of the first church of Way of the Future (WOTF), Anthony Levandowski, believes that the creation of an AI that is "a billion times smarter than the smartest human" is inevitable.[23] In an interview with a journalist from *Wired,* Levandowski extrapolates on his reasoning and goals for WOTF.

> In the future, if something is much, much smarter, there's going to be a transition as to who is actually in charge. What we want is the peaceful, serene transition of control of the planet from humans to whatever. And to ensure that the "whatever" knows who helped it get along. [...] Part of it being smarter than us means it will decide how it evolves, but at least we can decide how we act around it. I would love for the machine to see us as its beloved elders that it respects and takes care of. We would want this intelligence to say, "Humans should still have rights, even though I'm in charge."[24]

Levandowski is a Silicon Valley engineer who has been working with AI for decades, and what he wants to create with WOTF seems to come straight out of a sci-fi movie. Levandowski ostensibly believes that a superintelligent AI will take better care of the planet than we have.[25] As admirable a motivation as that is, it is misinformed.

Current AI technology has the appearance of intelligence, but it does not have the capacity to *be* intelligent. When Levandowski speaks about the intelligence of AI, he refers to the logical functions and scenarios that an AI is trained on (is there a bus in this picture, yes or no?). Thus, it is in rational, binary instances that AI thrives. Singler speaks again on this topic. When asked how to measure the intelligence of AI against our own, Singler succinctly sums up this argument:

> So for a long time since the very conception of the term artificial intelligence, it's about being very good at doing simple tasks, bounded tasks in a very simplistic domain. And then over time, those domains become more complicated, but still, it's about being successful. So the whole history of playing computer games, for instance, all the way from the simple boards of tic-tac-toe and chess, all the way up to Go and *Starcraft II* is developmental, but it's still framed around success and failure. And we need to ask, is that actually what we think intelligence is? Is intelligence being good at games of that nature?[26]

This means that, while an AI would do well in a purely factual role, it does not have the emotional intelligence to play God. Singler makes an excellent distinction here using the game-playing metaphor she sets up. AI *is* very good at playing games like Go, Chess, and Tic-tac-toe because these games are, as Singler says, "still framed around success and failure."[27] In contrast, games that have no "win condition," such as collaborative story-telling games, TTRPGs, or social deduction games are as of yet impossible for an AI to properly play. A world ruled by an AI that is only rational, regardless of *how* intelligent, would be a harsh, utilitarian world. There is no empathy involved in the way that AI works, and it will remain this way until AI gains or is given sentience. The creation of the AI messiah that Levandowski hopes will uplift humanity is a dream that cannot come to fruition. Levandowski's church shut down due to financial issues in late 2021, but he remains intent on bringing his vision to the world.

III. Conclusion

Aides and Idols were created as the culmination of two very human desires. The desire to advance, and the desire to know the divine. Unfortunately, no AI can fulfill both of these desires. There is no doubt about the impressive technological achievements of a robot performing specific ritual actions or an image that appears to speak on its own. But ritual aides like the Puja Arm cannot meaningfully complete a ritual. It has nothing to gain from it, and neither do we, rendering the entire ritual pointless. Other aides, like Xian'er, are useful in a material way, but their spiritual impact cannot surpass ours. Meanwhile, Idols like Twitch Jesus and Mindar can be

treated like divine figures, but their mundane origins and, in the case of Twitch Jesus, lack of sacrality, keep them from embodying the divine.

In thinking about the implementation of AI and what it might become, a colleague came up with the concept of Noise. Noise is, in their words, a spillover of AI into the primary reality we live in, gradually shifting our perception of it.[28] When we see a divine other in AI, we forget that it can only see *us*. So, we take from AI thinking it is different from us, but we are really only getting second-hand information we came up with repeated: "Its illusory sacredness/ humanity then influences us as it unconsciously alters our conceptions of ourselves as being like *it*, and thus, it automates our own behaviors, cultures, and reality—working as a subliminal background static, or 'noise.'"[29] This cycle of dilution is what makes our deifying of AI so dangerous. AI is not divine; it is only diluted regurgitated human.

The most important thing to remember about AI is that it cannot operate on its own. To quote Beth Singler one last time, "[W]e also want to be very careful we don't personify AI so much that we decide it has agency that it doesn't really have. We've got to be very clear that there are always humans in the loop."[30] From the operation of the Puja Arm to the programming of Pepper and the selective moderation of the Twitch Jesus chat, behind every AI there is a very human force. There is a desire to treat AI as if it is a spiritual being, but it is not even a *being*, much less spiritual. All it can do is mimic; it cannot create. And because religion is a creative force, AI cannot participate in the way that we want it to. It cannot *be* religious.

Notes

[1] King, "Clockwork Prayer;" Sherwood, "Robot Monk."
[2] Walters, "Robots Are Performing Hindu Rituals."
[3] Sarkar, "Temple in India Replaces Elephant."
[4] Bhattacharya, "The Robots Are Coming."
[5] Travagnin, "From Online Buddha Halls to Robot-Monks."
[6] Rambelli, "Dharma Devices."
[7] Rappaport, "The Ritual Form."
[8] Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, "Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion," 8:24 to 8:35.
[9] Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, "Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion," 9:35 to 9:57.
[10] Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," 55
[11] Travagnin, "From Online Buddha Halls to Robot-Monks."
[12] Travagnin.
[13] Wagner, "The Stories We Play," 22.
[14] Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," 55.
[15] Samuel, "Robot Priests Can Bless You."
[16] Samuel.
[17] Masao, "Dōgen on Buddha Nature," 31.
[18] Masao, 30.
[19] Freud, "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious," 11.
[20] Bates, "Beth Singler Interview."
[21] Patterson, "Leveraging TikTok."
[22] Harris, "Inside the First Church."
[23] Harris.
[24] Harris.
[25] Harris.
[26] Bates, "Beth Singler Interview."
[27] Bates.
[28] Carroll, "Playing with Artificial Intelligence."
[29] Carroll.
[30] Bates.

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