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Artificial intelligence and religion

REPORT FROM A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION | 1 FEB 2019



Report from a roundtable discussion on the topic *Artificial intelligence and religion*

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

Mats Aldén | Dean of the Diocese of Lund, PhD in Ethics

Hassanain Govani | Leader of a Shia congregation in Stockholm

Johanna Gustafsson Lundberg | Associate professor in Theological Ethics, Lund University

Maria Küchen | Author, columnist and cultural journalist

Oliver Li | PhD in Philosophy of Religion, Uppsala University

Blaženka Scheuer | Senior lecturer in Old Testament Exegesis, Lund University

Johan Tyrberg | Bishop of the Diocese of Lund

Kalle Åström | Professor of Mathematics, Lund University

Susanne Wigorts Yngvesson | Professor of Ethics, University College Stockholm

Sara Wrige | Priest and head minister of the Diocese of Skara, PhD in Physics

BACKGROUND

Existential, ethical, philosophical, technological, and theological issues were addressed in a lively discussion between researchers and representatives of religious communities, who came together to exchange views on the topic of artificial intelligence and religion. What challenges do religions and religious studies face when it comes to high-tech societal change? What role can religions play and how may they be developed and changed in such a society? How can scholars of religion and theology contribute to tackle some of the challenges that face society because of an increased use of AI?

The text below is a summary of the discussion; however, it also contains additional thoughts on the themes that emerged during the evening. With the aim of presenting the discussion as clearly as possible, we have organised the themes discussed in three groups as follows.

AI AND SOCIETY AT LARGE

The strong interest in AI in society today provides outstanding opportunities for interdisciplinary discussions. The pursuit to improve the human condition and to contribute to the development of a good society, to develop the common good, is often described as the driving force of research. To do this, collaboration is required between scholars of technology and natural sciences on the one hand and scholars of social science, humanities, religious studies, and theology on the other. In our work to develop an AI that is able to promote a good society for all, it is important, firstly, to consider the issue of what makes a good society (Gustafsson Lundberg) and, secondly, to consider the issue of what the general common good actually is (Wrige). We should also consider the needs of animals and nature in the common good, not only those of human beings.

Irrespective of whether strong AI is developed in the future, it is important to see the current technical development of AI as a kind of society-transforming revolution. Throughout history, revolutions, not least the technical ones, have frequently transformed society for the better, but unemployment, unhealthy work environments, serious occupational injuries, and environmental destruction, which often follow in their wake, have brought suffering to human beings. We need to learn from history and consider any suffering, including any current suffering, which the development of AI may bring. We need to be prepared and try, as far as possible, to mitigate the negative effects of the development (Åström).

AI AND LIVING RELIGION TODAY

The religious traditions today have developed over hundreds of years in different and constantly shifting cultural, political, geographical, and technological contexts. The religious traditions are therefore characterised by a highly developed ability to transform and adapt. In contrast to what is often claimed, the key issue for the religious traditions is not orthodoxy – the idea of correct doctrine, but orthopraxy – the idea of correct practice (Govani). The most important issue then becomes the issue of what the (religious) human being *does* with AI and how they relate to it. New technological are already successfully integrated in and indispensable for the everyday lives and lives of worship of religious individuals and communities (Tyrberg). AI offers great opportunities to assist in religious life such as the possibility to follow a service or talk to a priest or other spiritual leaders via radio, TV or mobile apps, the storage of large amounts of ancient textual material etc. (Govani). In our high-tech times, space is also a place in which humans as religious beings meet technology and where AI has a specific role to play (Küchen).

The dangers of AI are clear in the technology already in use, something to which we must pay particularly attention (Tyrberg). Humans are vulnerable and exposed to the risk that the existing data about everyone could end up in the 'wrong' hands and be used for malicious purposes. In the same way, humans are at risk of being enslaved by AI in a situation in which their lives are increasingly controlled by algorithms to which they have surrendered (Govani). The risks and dangers of AI are manifested not least in the fears and concerns humans often consult priests and/or their religious leaders about. Since religious institutions have significant experience of treating and taking care of people's concerns and fears, it is also important to distinguish between founded and unfounded fears, particularly when it comes to AI (Åström, Tyrberg). In summary, there is great potential for the constructive use of AI in religious communities today, however, AI must be used carefully and attention must be given to the accompanying risks.

AI AND THEOLOGICAL/EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS

The development of AI and its extensive use gives rise to burning existential and theological questions. The following questions are particularly prominent. What happens to human freedom in a society characterised by AI, and how is the free will of humans affected? What is a human being when the line between human and machine is no longer clearly defined and the machine becomes an extension of the human being?

What does the idea of AI do to human identity? Do we view AI as a tool to satisfy our egoistic needs, i.e. are we trying to create a new slave class? Is it possible or even desirable to create perfect and faultless systems? Can we imagine, and potentially prefer a deficient and imperfect AI? Can consciousness exist in something other than biological material? Can AI be considered a part of creation, a part of God, an image of God?

Free will has been the object of discussion and interrogation, recently by the historian Yuval Noah Harari who claims that the idea of human free will is a myth founded in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and subsequently supported by liberalism. Today, humans are not free, claims Harari, quite the opposite, we are manipulated from within without realising it: the human being has been hacked. Even if we do not adopt Harari's view, we should reformulate the idea of free will and adapt it to a high-tech society. We should protect the inner world of human beings, their integrity, in this society and search for the unique, true humanity in the human being (Gustafsson Lundberg, Govani).

The identity of human beings is affected by their relationship to the machines they own, carry with them, and/or use. The self-image of human beings is transformed particularly in the not uncommon development of emotional relationships with machines. If, by extension, this means that the machine can solve the problem of human loneliness, we have to ask ourselves whether we can program the machine with the ability to consent and thereby create reciprocity. If this were possible, we should consider whether there is also space for forgiveness, mercy, and salvation in the human-machine relationship (Wigorts Yngvesson).

Everyday moral dilemmas (e.g. the trolley problem) pose a challenge to even a high-tech system. Given that human deficiencies, just like their creativity and ability to evaluate, are a fundamental part of humanity, can we create a faultless AI system? Which interests control AI's ability to assess human lives in situations where a life must be sacrificed? Alternatively, is a defective and imperfect AI preferable? Expressed in theological terms, what is the role and place of sin in the AI system? (Aldén)

The development of AI in society underlines the need to redefine the theological view of existence. A classical theistic idea system with an almighty God at the centre poses philosophical/theological problems, problems already present in the Old Testament texts, more precisely in the Book of Job. Here, the question of theodicy is posed, i.e. the question of how there can be evil in a world controlled by an almighty God at its centre. However, there are religious philosophical/theological approaches other than theism, such as panentheism, which can provide scholars of religion with tools to discuss this new high-tech phenomenon (Li).

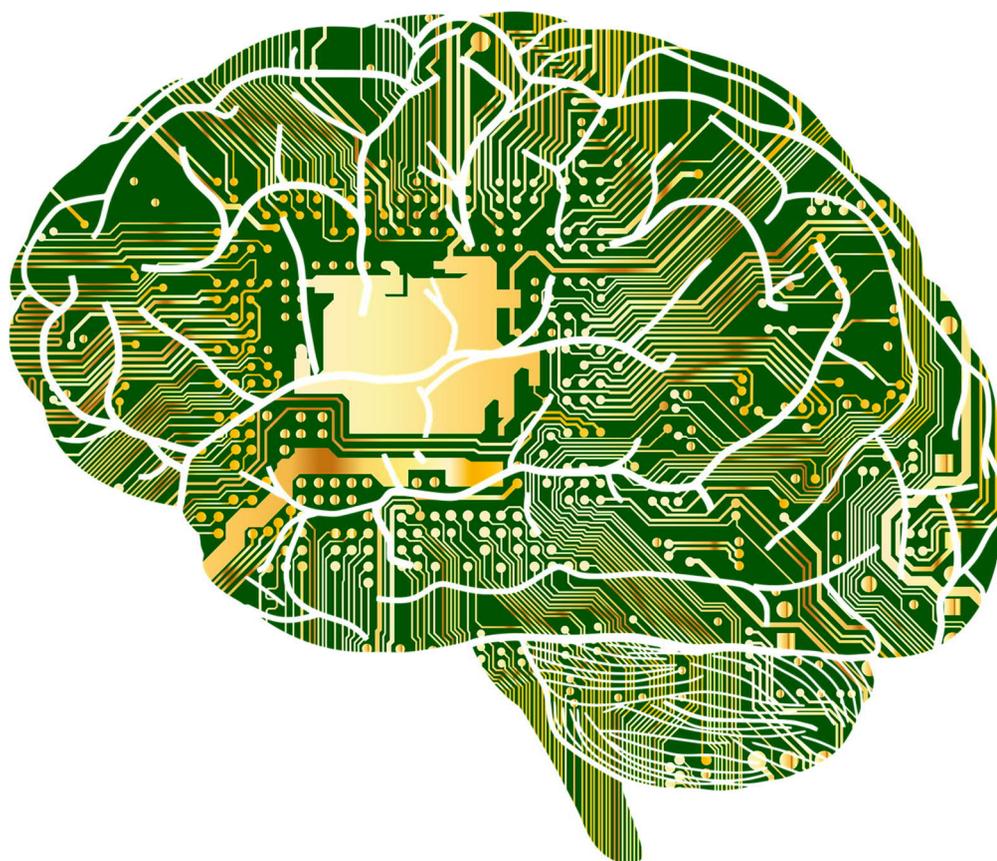
The issue of the purpose of the development of AI casts light on the created object. There is a risk that humans will develop behaviours toward machines that ultimately have a negative impact on humans. What identity and rights will humans assign to AI? If, through AI, we aim to create a machine that is to act as a slave for the human being, a new 'slave class', how does this affect humans as moral beings? (Wrige)

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

The issue of AI and religion is an important aspect of the bigger issue of the impact of AI on society and human beings at large. Scholars of religion face the task of redefining some of their most fundamental concepts.

The creation of a machine that reflects the human being with regard to intelligence, knowledge, consciousness, and form, brings to mind two biblical stories of the creation of humans themselves in Genesis 1-3. It is clear that some of the concepts we are wrestling with today are not entirely new – human beings have always wondered what it actually means to be human and how their actions can risk their continued existence. Ancient texts, their world of ideas, and the traditions that have preserved them for hundreds of years to the current day, are the research subjects of scholars of religion and theology. Experiences and insights of numerous generations of humans before us can might be able to contribute to the challenges of our time. The roundtable discussion has generated important issues for further research. Thus, this report concludes with a renewed emphasis on the need for interdisciplinary discussions, but also discussions with all of society's stakeholders.

Blaženka Scheuer and Maria Sturesson



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