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Fear of AI, Christianity, and the Modern Library

Brady D. Lund and Zoë A. Teel

Abstract

As artificial intelligence (AI) continues to reshape aspects of our world, fears and misunderstandings about its implications are widespread. Some of these concerns are rooted in the practices and beliefs of our religious communities. This article aims to address worries regarding AI and its impact on religion and Christian traditions by examining the nature of AI and its limitations, stressing the importance of informed discussions within communities. Examples drawn from academic literature, scripture, and prominent figures within the Church are used to illustrate key points. Libraries and librarians are discussed as crucial facilitators of these informed discussions about AI within their communities. Both secular and theology-based approaches are explored to alleviate fears within communities surrounding generative artificial intelligence.

As evidenced by recent innovations like ChatGPT, the world is rapidly transforming around us, driven by the emergence of generative artificial intelligence. Often forgotten in the excitement and speculation about these developments is the fact that many people are very anxious about this coming revolution. This fear stems not only from economic questions like “will this technology take my job?” but also existential questions. If a computer can be made to think and reason, could it be said to have a consciousness? A soul? The modern AI models are nothing of the sort, but concern for the future can seem very real. In light of these concerns, it is imperative that the library be one place where these fears can be abated by informed professionals.

Fear of AI

Fear of artificial intelligence innovations is pervasive in society.¹ From the 2017 Pew Research Center study *Automation in Everyday Life*, it is evident that concerns about AI technologies and how they may impact society varies among different population demographics, such as the type of job in which an individual is employed.² Kaya et al. note additional factors like personality traits, age, and gender may play a role.³ The greatest reason for fear among these populations is the economic impact that these technologies are anticipated to have. Though, there are many other factors that contribute as well, such as the potential upset to personal values and way-of-life.⁴

¹ Lauren Leffer, “‘AI Anxiety’ Is on the Rise – Here’s How to Manage It,” last modified October 2, 2023, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/ai-anxiety-is-on-the-rise-heres-how-to-manage-it/>.

² Aaron Smith and Monica Anderson, “Automation in Everyday Life,” Pew Research Center, last modified October 4, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/10/04/automation-in-everyday-life/>.

³ Feridun Kaya, Fatih Aydin, Astrid Schepman, Paul Rodway, Okan Yetişensoy, and Meva Demir Kaya, “The Roles of Personality Traits, AI Anxiety, and Demographic Factors in Attitudes Toward Artificial Intelligence,” *International Journal of Human–Computer Interaction* 40, no. 2 (2024): 500.

⁴ Deborah G. Johnson and Mario Verdicchio, “AI Anxiety,” *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 68, no. 9 (2017): 2267.

Fear of AI has been noted by some researchers to be particularly pronounced among the religiously affiliated. Yilmaz noted that religiously-affiliated people tend to believe that AI models should be designed to align with their beliefs and fear that this is not the case.⁵ Because the average person knows very little about who is behind AI models or how they are trained, they can perceive that the biases of the creator will be built into the model, and that these biases will not align with their own beliefs. This is not an entirely false perspective. AI can be biased both towards and against certain religions based on its training data.⁶ Models trained heavily on Christian texts and apologetics, guided by the religion's values, will produce different results than ones trained heavily on secular texts only. Because of the close relationships that can be forged between humans and their technology, especially interactive interfaces like ChatGPT, there is reason to believe that humans may become addicted to AI, creating trust in a flawed algorithm to provide guidance on topics like religion.⁷

Some religion writers have suggested that religion, and particularly Christianity, are incompatible with the emergence of AI, and so Christian institutions may themselves fear the emergence of these technologies.⁸ Others suggest that the emergence of automation technologies results in a decline in religious participation.⁹ However, these perspectives, at best, tell only half of the story. Many prominent figures in Christianity embrace AI but demand that it be developed ethically, to do good for humanity, and to promote well-being but not artificially replace the

⁵ Mert Can Yilmaz, "Divine Alignment: A Survey-Based Study on How Religion Influences Expectations for AI Alignment," (master's thesis, Uppsala University, 2023), 1. <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1769193&dswid=9328>

⁶ Randall Reed, "AI In Religion, AI For Religion, AI And Religion: Towards A Theory of Religious Studies and Artificial Intelligence," *Religions* 12, no. 6 (2021): article 401.

⁷ Kate Lucky, "AI Will Shape Your Soul," *Christianity Today* 67, no. 7 (2023): 40.

⁸ Jean-Baptiste Bonaventure, "Why Religions Are Right To Be Afraid of AI," *Vice*, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4ad5yd/why-religions-are-right-to-be-afraid-of-ai>.

⁹ Joshua Conrad Jackson, Kai Chi Yam, Pok Man Tang, Chris G. Sibley, and Adam Waytz, "Exposure to Automation Explains Religious Declines," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120, no. 34 (2023): e2304748120.

experience of life-and-death on earth. Pope Francis is active in global summits on artificial intelligence.¹⁰ He has an advisor whose role is to help influence ethical AI policy.¹¹ The Vatican has even released a book on AI ethics.¹² The Church of England, and many Protestant Churches, are more reticent towards AI and Big Tech but stop well short of outright opposing innovation, instead calling for ethical development and respect for the human right to work.¹³ Christian scholars have certainly not shown reluctance to considering the role of AI in religion and the Church, with several prominent theologians and journals publishing calls for papers on this topic.¹⁴

Fear as a construct often stems from misunderstanding. The actual threat is much less than the perceived threat. Humans fear uncertainty, even if the result of that uncertainty is actually something tremendously beneficial. In Mark 6:49-50 Jesus walks on water, and it says of the disciples, "...when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said 'Take courage! It is I. Do not be afraid.'"¹⁵ To fear and misinterpret the unknown is human, but the perceived threat does not always align with reality.

Misconceptions About AI

¹⁰ Vatican News, "Pope Francis To Participate In G7 Session On AI," *Vatican News*, April 26, 2024, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-04/pope-francis-g7-summit-italy-artificial-intelligence.html>.

¹¹ Gian Volpicelli, "Meet The Vatican's AI Mentor," *Politico*, February 12, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/meet-the-vatican-ai-mentor-diplomacy-friar-paolo-benanti-pope-francis/>.

¹² Thomas Germain, "The Vatican Releases Its Own AI Ethics Handbook," *Gizmodo*, June 28, 2023, <https://gizmodo.com/pope-francis-vatican-releases-ai-ethics-1850583076>.

¹³ The Church of England, "Synod Affirms Work As Key To 'Human Dignity And Purpose' In The Face Of AI Revolution," news release, February 26, 2024, <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/synod-affirms-work-key-human-dignity-and-purpose-face-ai-revolution>.

¹⁴ "Artificial Intelligence And Religion Exploratory Session," American Academy of Religion, accessed May 12, 2024, <https://papers.aarweb.org/ai/artificial-intelligence-and-religion-exploratory-session>.

¹⁵ The *New International Version (NIV)* will be used throughout this paper.

It can be argued that many of the fears about AI among religious communities stem from misconceptions about what AI is and how it works. While these AI technologies have their flaws, examination of these misconceptions clearly shows that they play no major threat to religious practices. Instead, the concern should be to influence developers to produce models that represent ethical values and benefit humanity rather than undermine it.

1. A fundamental concern about AI may stem from the belief that it is sacrilegious to create something artificial that thinks and feels like a human – developers would be “playing God.”

This concern stems from a misunderstanding of what artificial intelligence is. Could AI be made to think and feel—develop its own moral system and beliefs—someday? It is possible. This would be what computer scientists call “superintelligence.” But this is not even remotely close to the capabilities of current AI large language models. These models do not reason, nor can they hold beliefs or possess anything that could remotely be deemed “consciousness.” They are probabilistic models. They analyze text that you input and then, based on advanced statistical predictions, try to generate content that you will find satisfactory. Through upvoting responses, we reinforce whether the model has done well or poorly. These models are no more human than characters in a video game. They have no free will, nor desire to interact in any way that approximates free will.

2. Many fear new technologies like AI because it is impossible to know the creators’ motivation.

If you believe that Big Tech is evil, why would the advent of AI models change that belief? While the merits of the first half of the preceding statement could be argued, the second

half of the statement seems fair. If an untrustworthy salesperson starts trying to sell you on a “new” “life-altering” product, you would probably be reluctant to buy. But AI as a general concept that people fear should be separated from fear directed towards specific developers like Microsoft or Google. There are many ethical developers of AI applications.

Fear could also be directed towards potential biases built into models – biases that may favor certain worldviews over others. This is a justifiable concern. Data bias can significantly impact the quality of AI models. However, there is a difference between well-placed concern about potential biases in AI models and the kind of AI fear exhibited by many individuals. These concerns should drive calls for transparency, not calls for eliminating these innovations altogether.

3. Some may argue that the emergence of superintelligent AI would radically alter all aspects of our life and belief systems.

That is true. Superintelligent AI that can think, feel, and believe would change a great deal in society and within our belief systems. However, as mentioned before, this type of technology does not currently exist. Current AI models have some great uses, but pondering existential philosophy is not one of them. They cannot think for themselves; they operate based on their training. So, this *may* be an issue to revisit down the road, but it is not relevant to current discussions of AI models like ChatGPT. Even in the case of superintelligent AI, we need not fear the major existential questions about how this technology impacts Christian belief, as this technology, no matter how intelligent, lack several key ingredients that make humans “human”: made of flesh in the image of God (Gen. 2:22-24), mortal (Gen. 2:7), and fallible (Num. 23:19). No matter how advanced the technology becomes, AI will never be “human” and its creation is not equivalent to “playing God.”

Acknowledging these misconceptions about modern AI models, it is clear that many fears may stem from simple misunderstandings of the technology. These technologies are complicated and there are many multifaceted issues associated with them. However, these issues should not lead to fear. Instead, they should spark important discourse about these innovations. Libraries can facilitate these discussions by hosting educational sessions that connect researchers and developers with the public.

Libraries and AI

For those who fear coming advancements in artificial intelligence for religious purposes, libraries could serve a role in assuaging those fears, either through a secular (in the case of public institutions/libraries) or more of a theology-based approach. Additionally, for patrons experiencing “technostress,” defined as the reluctance or anxiety surrounding emerging technologies, librarians can offer valuable support.¹⁶ The effectiveness of librarians in mitigating concerns and providing education about AI may vary based on their specific role within the library setting and their individual approach.

Secular and Faith-Based Approaches to AI

Librarians play a crucial role in disseminating information about AI. Libraries are already involved in organizing outreach, programming, and instructional initiatives centered around AI, despite the need for these programs to grow.¹⁷ There is a significant overlap between secular and

¹⁶ Paul Hartog, “A Generation Of Information Anxiety: Refinements And Recommendations,” *The Christian Librarian* 60, no. 1 (2017): 8; Lawrence R. Wheelless, Libby Eddleman-Spears, Lee D. Magness, and Raymond W. Preiss, “Informational Reception Apprehension And Information From Technology Aversion: Development And Test Of A New Construct,” *Communication Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2005): 143; David Bawden and Lynn Robinson, “The Dark Side Of Information: Overload, Anxiety And Other Paradoxes And Pathologies,” *Journal of Information Science* 35, no. 2 (2009): 182.

¹⁷ Amanda Wheatley and Sandy Hervieux, “Artificial Intelligence in Academic Libraries: An Environmental Scan,” *Information Services & Use* 39, no. 4 (2019): 347.

Christian institutions and how librarians could approach and educate about AI. These endeavors could span various proficiency levels, catering to both beginners and advanced learners. Take, for instance, the recent workshop hosted by the University of North Texas Willis Library titled “Mastering Media and AI Literacy in the Digital Age.”¹⁸ This workshop was geared toward students/patrons with little knowledge about AI. It provided background on AI and explained the ethical implications of AI as well as the possibilities with AI. Through such engagements, librarians have a prime opportunity to teach their patrons about AI. This would hopefully aid in clarifying its abilities and dispelling misconceptions.

Those who work in public libraries could team up with churches of all faiths and denominations to educate about AI. Elderly Christian populations are known for being wearier of using AI, and other emerging technologies.¹⁹ This may be because members of this population may not have the same level of access to resources about AI/emerging technologies or awareness of where to find these resources as, for example, a college student. Public libraries, especially in smaller and rural communities, could see this as an opportunity to team with respected community institutions. They could not only educate about AI but also promote the library, share literacy resources, and build goodwill with the community.

By delving into topics like algorithms, machine learning, analytical reasoning, neural networks, and coding, librarians can offer insights into what AI truly entails. For instance, while mainstream media portrayals like those in *iRobot* or *M3gan* may shape public perceptions, it is essential to recognize that widely-used AI, such as Generative AI, functions more like familiar tools such as Google, chatbots, or grammar checkers like Grammarly. Much of the apprehension

¹⁸ UNT Libraries. “Mastering Media and AI Literacy in the Digital Age,” Graduate Workshops at the University of North Texas, 2024, <https://tgs.unt.edu/workshop/mastering-media-and-ai-literacy-digital-age>.

¹⁹ Brady Lund, “Predictors of Use of Digital Technology For Communication Among Older Adults: Analysis of Data From the Health and Retirement Study,” *Working with Older People* 25, no. 4 (2021): 294.

surrounding AI often arises not so much from the technology itself, but rather from the people using it.²⁰ Considering that librarians serve diverse populations it is an important point to consider – who will be using this technology and how will they handle it? Librarians, particularly those in academic environments, are not just presented with an opportunity; they face a moral imperative to engage deeply with the ethical dimensions of both the technological advancements themselves and their impact on human experiences.

Within libraries affiliated with Christian institutions, whether seminary libraries, theology libraries, or private Christian university and school libraries, a unique opportunity arises to forge connections and bridge the gap between AI and scripture. Take for instance LeTourneau University, a smaller private conservative Christian university in East Texas. Despite its size it has boldly embraced this opportunity through the production of a documentary titled *Made for More: A Computer Science Journey*.²¹ Sponsored by the university's Faith, Science, and Technology Initiative, this film delves into various facets of artificial intelligence (AI) exemplifying how such institutions can engage in meaningful dialogue about the intersection of faith and technology.

For librarians at Christian institutions, the potential for engaging with these emerging technologies and helping their patrons/population explore them is similar to the secular approach. However, it could also connect faith and AI. One avenue could be through hosting educational workshops, a familiar and effective method for informing patrons, which librarians are adept at conducting, having utilized it for prior technological advancements.²² These

²⁰ Thomas Range, *Who's Afraid of AI?: Fear and Promise in the Age of Thinking Machines* (New York: The Experiment, 2019), 9.

²¹ Belcher Center, "Made for More: A Computer Science Journey," LeTourneau University, n.d.

²² Gyuri Kang and Donghee Sinn, "Technology Education in Academic Libraries: An Analysis of Library Workshops," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 50, no. 2 (2024): 102856, 1.

workshops could serve as platforms for initiating dialogues on how AI intersects with Christian principles, particularly ethics and stewardship. Additionally, librarians could forge partnerships with professors from various disciplines to deliver instructional sessions on ethical considerations surrounding AI. Librarians roles have changed, over the years, to encompass more technology and to introduce it to their populations.²³ Given their pivotal role in introducing new technologies, particularly within academic settings, facilitating such discussions would be relatively straightforward. Topics could encompass pressing issues like algorithmic bias, privacy implications, and the socio-economic impact of automation.²⁴

Evidence of Technological Advancements in Scripture

Initiating conversations about the handling of AI at the university level and exploring how faith can inform its use is paramount. It is especially crucial for institutions seeking to bridge the gap between AI and faith to recognize that innovation and early technology are recurring themes woven throughout scriptural narratives. For instance, in the Book of Genesis, we find accounts such as Cain's establishment of a city and his utilization of bronze and iron, showcasing early human ingenuity (Gen. 4:8-24). Similarly, Noah's construction of the Ark illustrates ambitious engineering that ultimately saved his family from a catastrophic flood. Chapter 11 recounts the Tower of Babel, a testament to human ambition and technological advancement (Gen. 7).

Even within the New Testament, there is a notable emphasis on building, expanding, and creating within the early Christian community, as seen in the Apostle Paul's epistles. Paul, describing himself as a "skilled master builder," underscores the role of guiding and nurturing

²³ Hao-Chang Sun et al., "Role Changing for Librarians in the New Information Technology Era," *New Library World* 112, no. 7/8 (2011): 321.

²⁴ Nishith Reddy Mannuru et al., "Artificial Intelligence in Developing Countries: The Impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Technologies for Development," *Information Development* (2023): 02666669231200628.

growth within the church (1 Cor. 3:10). Importantly, he roots this work in Christ, emphasizing that the foundation is firmly laid in Jesus Christ. Considering Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, adds another layer to this narrative. As a carpenter by trade, Jesus exemplifies creativity and innovation, both spiritually and practically (Mark 6:3). Thus, while skepticism towards technological advancements is understandable, there's evidence to suggest that biblical figures would have engaged with such technology rather than simply condemning its existence.

AI Literacy Within the Library

An essential consideration, well understood by librarians, revolves around literacy, specifically AI literacy. Literacy typically encompasses the skills and tools required for critical analysis, whether applied to media or information. This involves making sure that whatever is being analyzed is being done critically, ethically, and perhaps most importantly, accurately. Digital literacy, which entails basic computer navigation, is often regarded as a prerequisite for AI literacy.²⁵ Ongoing research delves into methods for cultivating AI literacy among individuals without technical backgrounds.

Enhancing AI literacy may manifest differently depending on the library setting and the individual librarian. In their 2023 study, Cardon et al. explored instructor perspectives on AI through a series of questions. Their findings suggest that AI literacy encompasses dimensions such as application, authenticity, accountability, and agency.²⁶ As Long and Magerko assert, “AI literacy is evolving, encompassing a set of competencies that empower individuals to critically evaluate” AI technologies, communicate and collaborate effectively, and utilize AI as a tool in

²⁵ Duri Long and Brian Magerko, “What is AI Literacy? Competencies and Design Considerations,” in *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, (2020): 2.

²⁶ Peter Cardon et al., “The Challenges and Opportunities of AI-Assisted Writing: Developing AI Literacy for the AI Age,” *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* 86, no. 3 (2023): 277.

various settings, including online, at home, and in the workplace.²⁷ Librarians frequently oversee and facilitate the dissemination of strategies to enhance literacy. Despite certain librarians harboring reservations about AI, it is increasingly inevitable that AI will become integrated into library environments, leading to inquiries about AI products, as evidenced by recent queries regarding ChatGPT and fictitious references.²⁸

AI Literacy and Scripture

Could there possibly be an alignment between literacy, especially AI literacy, and scripture? Is literacy not fundamentally about seeking truth? And is Christianity not, too, about discerning truth from falsehood? Both advocate for individuals to pursue knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. With the word “truth” appearing 233 times in the Bible, it is clear that exploring truth is paramount? The concept of truth may take on different meanings, especially when considering AI in contrast to the truth as defined in scripture. As stated in John 14:6, “Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.” While we acknowledge that AI is not divine, the focus shifts towards assessing the reliability and credibility of information, particularly within the realm of AI's inputs and outputs. Rather than juxtaposing truths, the emphasis lies on the pursuit of truth – discerning between fact and fiction.

Graber points out in a book review of *Faith and Fake News* that there are ways for “ordinary Christians attempting to navigate online spaces with their sanity and integrity intact.”²⁹ There is a parallel need for Christians to develop strategies to engage with AI literacy authentically and ethically. The principles of discernment amidst the deluge of information are as

²⁷ Long and Magerko, 3.

²⁸ Zoë Abbie Teel, Ting Wang, and Brady Lund, “ChatGPT Conundrums,” *College & Research Libraries News* 84, no. 6 (2023): 205.

²⁹ Katherine J. Graber, “Review of *Faith and Fake News: A Guide to Consuming Information Wisely*,” *The Christian Librarian* 66, no. 1 (2023): 16.

relevant in the AI, ever-growing digital age as they are in traditional literacy contexts. As much as emerging technologies can drive anxiety and uncertainty, they also provide opportunity. If developers and the public can be directed to produce and use these technologies responsibly, then they can effectively promote greater equity and global well-being. As such, it is imperative to promote AI literacy alongside the other literacies that librarians embrace, like information and digital literacy.

Conclusion

While there are plenty of legitimate concerns about emerging artificial intelligence innovations, the idea that the current technology will cause harm to religious beliefs and institutions is not a realistic one. Library professionals can take a proactive role in educating the public about the potential threats of AI, while also stressing the benefits that these technologies may bring. Through AI literacy training, an AI-informed population can be developed. Whether a secular or faith-based approach is taken to educating the public, the ultimate goal of reducing anxiety about new AI-related developments can be achieved. Librarians are encouraged to educate themselves about AI or engage experts to collaborate with them on educating the public.

About the Authors

Brady D. Lund, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of information science at the University of North Texas. He received his master's and doctoral degrees from Emporia State University, Kansas. His work looks at information ethics, particularly in relation to emerging technologies. Brady was a plenary session speaker at the 2022 ACL Annual Conference held in Wichita, Kansas. He may be contacted at Brady.Lund@unt.edu.

Zoë (Abbie) Teel, MLS, is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Learning Technologies at the University of North Texas. She earned her undergraduate degree from LeTourneau University in Interdisciplinary Studies B.S., with a concentration in Biblical Studies. In December 2023, she completed her master's in library science. Her research centers on exploring human interactions with technologies such as AI and social media.

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