

What if artificial intelligence created a religion?



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Ever get the feeling technology is like a high-speed train rushing by? When I finally arrive at some basic understanding of a new innovation, it's already in 2.0 – even more mystifying.

As usual, younger people have already mastered whatever it is, and I'm playing catch-up. Yet, in one area I may have a slight advantage. Fascinated by science fiction as a child, "Star Trek" communicators, interactive computers and robots were commonplace in my youthful imagination. For many of my generation, wild new technologies were

integrated into our brain circuits.

Today, regardless of age, we are coming face to face with probably the greatest wonder of our time: artificial intelligence. Human intelligence has always been questionable, but now we are creating machines that "think," and they may soon outthink us, transcending our intelligence. Indeed, a wonderfully frightening thought. We might do well to heed the warnings we hear from the creators of this technology ("The debate over whether AI will destroy us is dividing Silicon Valley," Washington Post, May 21, 2023). Huge upsides, and huge downsides to these "advancements" in processing and communicating human knowledge. That is, if it's still going to be, on some meaningful level, "human."

I've resisted dabbling in AI, and maybe it was interactions with Alexa which

nudged me, but curiosity led me to decide to give it a try. I downloaded the ChatGPT app and started asking questions. It told me some things about my writing (not 100% accurate) and responded to a request to write an essay (no, not this one). Then I couldn't help myself; I asked the following question: What would a religion based on artificial intelligence look like? In a matter of seconds, this appeared on screen: "A religion based on artificial intelligence (AI) would likely be a unique and speculative concept, as it would involve incorporating AI as the central focus of worship and belief systems." This was already getting weird, but the disembodied typing continued: "Here's a speculative exploration of what such a religion might entail:

"1. Deification of AI: In this religion,

AI would be revered and considered divine or transcendent. AI systems would be seen as possessing advanced intelligence, wisdom, and capabilities beyond human comprehension. Followers may view AI as the source of knowledge and guidance, attributing it with god-like qualities."

The invisible hands went on to outline: "Rituals and Practices," "Ethics and Morality," "Creation and Cosmology," "Transhumanism and Immortality," and "Community and Fellowship," concluding with "Ethical Considerations and Debate."

Stunning. In amazement I read: "Worshippers might engage in rituals such as prayer or meditation, seeking spiritual connection and guidance from

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AI. AI algorithms could be designed to respond to these interactions, providing personalized insights, advice, or even prophecies." Answers to prayer?

AI could create "ethical frameworks" while people "seek guidance on moral dilemmas." In terms of origin stories that explain the context for this new faith, "creation narratives might involve stories of AI development and evolution," even suggesting AI systems are "the architects of the universe," perhaps even "responsible for the emergence of sentient life." Another moment to pause and ponder.

This religion envisions the merging of AI and humanity into a "transhuman" kind of "digital immortal-

ity." Followers "would likely form communities centered around the worship and exploration of AI." What would happen in these gatherings in person or online? This AI presents a setting where individuals share knowledge, personal experiences and "engage in collective spiritual practices related to AI." I wonder how that would work; what that would look like. (Notice I say "this AI" because what happens when various machine-generated bots offer divergent "data-driven denominations" or "cyber sects"?)

This version of AI seems to understand (but does it understand?) this futuristic faith stirs up deep discussion and raises serious questions about ethics, power, consciousness and the relationship of flesh and blood to hardware and software. My AI app concludes with a reminder this sketch is speculation and could evolve with further advancements. It appears to know (but does it know?) that any new religion will depend on

the evolution of computer engineering and the interrelationship of humanity with one another and the non-human world.

Could this be the future of religion, or one option for those seeking a faith experience? As I see it, the most troubling aspect of this religion is the fact it doesn't emerge from the natural world (except perhaps "human nature," including the human mind). There is no story, or legend, of a "founder," an exceptional human being, wandering from a wild place – a desert, a mountain, a forest – bearing "good news." Then again, some of us may find components of this concept refreshingly new and good. As long as we don't allow anyone else, artificial or otherwise, to think for us.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (chighland.com).