ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

This outline of key issues draws heavily on a recent article in the Atlantic by John Merritt, “Is AI a Threat to Christianity?” and a response by Paul Scherz published on Crux, “Christianity is Engaging AI, but in the Right Way.”

Distinction between Intelligent and Conscious Machines

Many technological developments under the wider artificial intelligence (AI) rubric do not raise difficult theological issues. Self-driving cars, for example, do not have souls. As computing power grows, however, a possible transition from intelligent to superintelligent, self-conscious machines cannot be ruled out. Parallel advances in neuroscience and brain modeling may eventually facilitate efforts to generate human-like self-awareness in machines.

Distinction between Ethical and Theological Controversies

Contemporary advances in robotics raise ethical and policy questions that link to moral theology and Catholic social teaching—for example, the fate of workers who will lose their jobs to machines in increasing numbers. Another question, engaged by secular and religious critics alike, is whether superintelligent machines might someday dominate or even exterminate humans. These questions are linked to, but different from, theological issues bearing on the implications of AI for our understanding of the soul and salvation.

The Question of the Soul and Whether Machines Could Have Them

Merritt equates the idea of the soul with the human: “Christians have mostly understood the soul to be a uniquely human element, an internal and eternal component that animates our spiritual sides. The notion originates from the creation narrative in the biblical book of Genesis, where God ‘created human beings in God’s own image.’”

Scherz responds: “Drawing upon the heritage of Greek philosophy, most theologians have understood the soul to be what makes a specific living thing what it is. It is the principle of growth and development in all living things, movements and sensation in animals, and rationality in human. Therefore, animals have souls, plants have souls, and an AI that could think and manipulate the world around it would have to have something like a soul.”

For Aquinas, Scherz argues, “we imagine God primarily in our potential for reason and free will, so any being with reason and free will would possess that image, including angels, for Aquinas, rational aliens, for Francis, even true AI, if it existed.”
The Question of Salvation and Human Exceptionalism

Merritt notes that “the Bible teaches that Jesus’s death redeemed ‘all things’ in creation—from ants to accountants—and made reconciliation with God possible. So did Jesus die for artificial intelligence, too? Can AI be ‘saved?’”

Merritt observes: “The Nicene Creed speaks of Jesus as ‘the only son of God, begotten, not made.’ The implicit corollary is that humans are God’s children who are made, not begotten. Christians believe that God makes humans, but humans make machines. By this logic, one might conclude that AI could not be considered God’s children or possess soul.”

Scherz: “Christianity argues for God’s special care for humanity, with the second person of the Trinity assuming a human nature in the Incarnation. This doctrine raises questions about Christ’s relation to any possible AI, but ones not fundamentally different to questions of how Christ redeems all of nonhuman creation, questions that have become ever more pressing given environmental devastation.”

Intelligent Machines and Christian Community

Merritt: “James McGrath, a professor of religion at Butler University, told his religion students to ask Siri, the personal assistant in Apple devices, to pray for them and observe what happened. The students quickly learned that Siri was more comfortable with questions like ‘What is prayer?’ than commands like ‘Pray for me.’ When directed to pray, Siri basically responded, ‘I’m not programmed to do that.’ But if a more advanced version Siri were programmed to pray, would such an action be valuable? Does God receive prayers from any intelligent being—or just human intelligence?”

In Laudato Si, Francis writes:

“Real relationships with others, with all the challenges they entail, now tend to be replaced by a type of internet communication which enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at whim, thus giving rise to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and with nature. Today’s media do enable us to communicate and to share our knowledge and affections. Yet at times they also shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences. For this reason, we should be concerned that, alongside the exciting possibilities offered by these media, a deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations, or a harmful sense of isolation, can also arise.”