

# The Priesthood of All Sentients? The Eclipse of Transcendence in an Age of Artificial Intelligence

Denni Boy Saragih 

Universitas Kristen Krida Wacana, Jakarta, Indonesia  
[denni.boy@ukrida.ac.id](mailto:denni.boy@ukrida.ac.id)

**Abstract:** BlessU-2 is a robot and a specifically designed anthropomorphic machine that performed a blessing service during 2017's exhibition in Wittenberg, Germany, commemorating 500 years of the reformation. The exhibition was intended to open a conversation about the future of the church's service and AI's role in it. This research explores and introduces today's AI research development and theological challenges for ecclesiology and Christian worship. The research explores the theological themes that can be employed by Christian theology in general and ecclesiology in particular. It proposes that the main challenge of AI developments is the reinterpretation of the transcendent in the form of AI in which technology is perceived as godlike. On the other hand, AI fills a void in the religious lacuna that reaffirms the yearning for meaning and connection. Finally, the paper proposes the importance of the basic human nature of relationality in an age of simulated artificial reality.

## Research Highlights:

- This article attempts to explore a theological response to the development of AI, with particular attention to ecclesiology.
- The author shows that as bearers of God's image, it is our duty to direct technological development for the greatest good, and that demands the church's wisdom and care.

## Article history

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of artificial intelligence (AI) raises the question of the possibility of a sentient being with intelligence on par with or surpassing humanity.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, as part of the commemoration of 500 years of the Reformation, the BlessU-2 robot was exhibited to explore the public response to a social robot in a religious context. It had more than 10,000 visitors and got 1923 responses, which were mostly positive (51%), neutral (29%), and also negative (20%).<sup>2</sup> It was reported that the exhibition successfully opened the question of the future of church service. The machine would help extend the church's service and provide assistance where there is no service delivered by humans available.<sup>3</sup>

## METHOD

This paper aims to explore a theological response to the development of AI, with particular attention to ecclesiology. For this purpose, we will first introduce some aspects of AI development which are important for a theological discussion. In the second part, we will propose some important themes that will be challenging. In the third section, we will offer some initial theological responses that can be made to the discussion. And finally, by way of conclusion, we will propose some further inquiries that can be pursued to explore the field of study.

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<sup>1</sup>Beth Singler, "An Introduction to Artificial Intelligence and Religion for the Religious Studies Scholar," *Implicit Religion* 20, no. 3 (2017): 215, <https://doi.org/10.1558/imre.35901>.

<sup>2</sup>Diana Löffler, Jörn Hurtienne, Ilona Nord, "Blessing Robot BlessU2: A Discursive Design Study to Understand the Implications of Social Robots in Religious Contexts," *International Journal of Social Robotics* 13 (2021): 269-270, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12369-019-00558-3>.

<sup>3</sup>Löffler et al., "Blessing Robot," 270.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Current Development and Challenges of AI Technology

Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be defined in various ways. In popular understanding, the term can be understood in ways distorted by dystopian or utopian imaginations. A dystopian imagination sees AI through an opposing point of view and sees in it mainly threat and destruction. On the other hand, a utopian imagination sees it in a more positive light and might be hopeful of its role in human flourishing. One helpful way to understand AI is a new technological development and a field of research "working toward rational agents that respond to stimuli, perhaps in ways comparable to modes of human cognition."<sup>4</sup> AI can be found in our smartphones, web browsers, applications, etc. As a field of research, AI is a fast-growing enterprise. With the development of machine-learning and deep-learning, where an AI can self-improve to provide a better solution by employing a massive amount of data (the Big Data), AI can produce a complex understanding or insights that even its algorithm programmer cannot entirely comprehend. This is made possible by three key developments in computer technology: the dramatic increase in computer processing, the improvement of computer storage, and the availability of an immense amount of data.<sup>5</sup> More recent developments of AI are natural language processing, facial recognition, strategic games, automated decision-making algorithm, automation in robotic form (in the form of cars, factories, and planes), recommendation algorithms, and diagnostics in healthcare. These were previously thought of as not compatible with the machine. But with the new develop-

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<sup>4</sup>Singler, "Artificial Intelligence," 215-216.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Robinson, "Introduction: A Computer Technology Perspective," in *The Robot Will See You Now*, ed. John Wyatt and Stephen N. Williams (London: SPCK, 2021), 1-2.

ment of AI, a digital computer can perform “tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings.”<sup>6</sup>

In the evolution of technology, AI can be divided into weak AI, also known as narrow AI, and strong AI, also known as general AI or Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). AGI is construed as a machine with a level of thinking that has self-awareness and behaves in some personhood. At present, no machine has achieved a human-level AGI. According to Nick Bostrom, by 2100, there is a 90% chance that a human-level machine intelligence (AGI) will be finally built.<sup>7</sup> Some others, such as Ray Kurzweil, suggest it might be sooner than that, i.e., by 2045.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, some scientists believe that while the complexity of a computer’s tasks will be developed exponentially, it will never reach a general intelligence similar to a human being.<sup>9</sup> A thinking machine will always be narrow and specific. It may be expanded according to the data included and show some complexity surpassing human imagination. Nevertheless, it will always be limited in its scope. Be that as it may, public perceptions of AI have reached a level in which AI has some agency or even a superagency. In 2018, a tweet became viral with the expression “blessed by algorithm.”<sup>10</sup> As public imagination interacts intimately with the role of AI in daily realities, a stroke of random luck in which one experiences some benefit from algorithm arrangement, the “blessing” is as-

signed as a grace endowed by a superagency AI.

In this AI era, human life and human faith are shaped by technology. Pastors prepare sermons with the help of software technology, and the congregation fact-checks the sermons through the “omniscient” Google. The “divine knowledge” is experienced through the fingertips with the godlike capability of technology. The “omnipresence” is a reality through Zoom and Google Meet. People can have a fellowship from around the globe, united not only by faith but also by technology. The ever-changing technology shapes human behavior and relationships. Now with 3.5 billion smartphone users, no one can truly measure the impact of this technology on human life.<sup>11</sup> The speed of change also brings about some unanticipated consequences. Some social media, such as Facebook, link people around the globe and have been a tool for a flow of information that results in fake news, teenage suicide, election manipulation, or even genocidal riots. The spread of lies is primarily because the power of chatbots empowered by AI technology is let loose without ethical direction.

The power of technology is also manifested in the overwhelming capacity of the users of their platform and driven by the hunger of capitalism; it monetises every bit of information into advertorial gains. In early 2000, Google was found to use fragments of personal data that one leaves behind after using its many apps as a resource for understanding and predicting future behaviours for capital gains.<sup>12</sup> In 2020, 92% of internet searches were made through Google’s free search engine. Other products, such as YouTube, Gmail, Google Maps, Google Books, etc., are all made freely available. However,

<sup>6</sup>B. J. Copeland, “Artificial Intelligence,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed October 21, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/technology/artificial-intelligence>.

<sup>7</sup>Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19.

<sup>8</sup>Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 136.

<sup>9</sup>Ragnar Fjelland, “Why General Artificial Intelligence Will Not Be Realized,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, no. 10 (2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0494-4>.

<sup>10</sup>Beth Singler, “‘Blessed by the Algorithm’: Theistic Conceptions of Artificial Intelligence in Online Discourse,” *AI and Society* 35, no. 4 (2020): 945, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-020-00968-2>.

<sup>11</sup>John Wyatt, “Briefing: AI and Digital Technologies,” accessed October 21, 2021, <https://johnwyatt.com/2020/01/10/Article-Artificial-Intelligence-and-Simulated-Relationships>.

<sup>12</sup>Wyatt, “AI and Digital Technologies.”

these “free” apps are not so free in the end because Google can harvest the information for targeted advertisement and monetize them with the power of their supermachine.<sup>13</sup>

The product and service are now employed under the regime of market behaviour modification and driven by surveillance capitalism. Purchasing behaviour can be predicted with the wealth of stored, accumulated, and analysed data; all are harvested without the consent of the users. The power of this method is now used by many giant companies such as Microsoft, Facebook, Amazon, and local tech companies in Indonesia such as Grab, GoJek, Tokopedia, Shopee, etc. One of the main objectives of behavioural modification is to prolong the user’s screen time and increase their click rate. So to this end, the wealth of stored personal data is used by AI algorithms to create some addictive behavior, unlike gambling addiction.<sup>14</sup> The habit stimulates some psychological numbness that, in some way, can be used for marketing purposes. The AI then recommends personalized identity and personalized activities based on intimate information about ourselves to the point that it would seem precisely what we want or need. Still, it is manufactured based on our buying, watching, and surfing histories.<sup>15</sup>

Data surveillance requires capital resources to sustain itself in a long data collection period before financial gain can be realized. However, this is not a problem for these companies. The requirement is easily fulfilled by the economic power of the “new superpowers.” Not only do they have capitals that can be compared to a wealthy country,

but these companies, owned by a few people, employ fewer staff and control more aspects of society, including its politics and regulations. With their financial power and social influence, they can hire the best mind from all over the globe and develop faster than any institution in the world. Furthermore, they can stop competition and possible competitors by buying start-up companies and incorporating them into their own.<sup>16</sup> The centrality of these companies’ economic, human resources and information power is the new Babylonian Tower of our late modernity.<sup>17</sup>

Another future challenge is the development of various simulated personalities that give voices to AI chatbots/assistants. We are familiar with Apple’s Siri, Amazon’s Alexa, and Google Home. The companies that produce them compete fiercely to reach every person, every home, and place in the world. These virtual personalities are created to simulate characters that relate well to the human relationship. In a very telling observation, David Polgar, a tech ethicist, remarks, “Human compassion can be gamed. It is the ultimate psychological hack, a glitch in human response that can be exploited to make a sticky product. That’s why designers give AIs human characteristics in the first place: they want us to like them.”<sup>18</sup> It will not be surprising if these chatbots become part of everyday life by 2030. In 2018, the Church of England incorporated Amazon’s Alexa to offer services such as inciting daily prayer, finding a church, answering questions about God, reading the Ten Commandments, and

<sup>13</sup>Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: PublicAffairs, 2020), 9-10.

<sup>14</sup>Wyatt, “AI and Digital Technologies.”

<sup>15</sup>Dirk Helbing et al., “Will Democracy Survive Big Data and Artificial Intelligence?” In *Towards Digital Enlightenment: Essays on the Dark and Light Sides of the Digital Revolution* (Zurich: Springer International, 2019), 73–98, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90869-4\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90869-4_7).

<sup>16</sup>Wyatt, “AI and Digital Technologies.”

<sup>17</sup>Joanna Ng, “How Artificial Super-Intelligence Is Today’s Tower of Babel,” *Christianity Today*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/june-web-only/artificial-intelligence-todays-tower-of-babel-ai-ethics.html>.

<sup>18</sup>David Ryan Polgar, “Robots That Look like Humans Raise Big Ethical Tech Questions about Empathy,” *Quartz*, June 22, 2017, <https://qz.com/1010828/is-it-une-thical-to-design-robots-to-resemble-humans/>.

explaining the meaning of believing in God.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the BlessU-2 Robot was created and exhibited in Wittenberg, Germany, to explore the question of machines in church service. The event itself is quite significant, commemorating 500 years of Reformation. Stephan Krebs from the Protestant Church of Hesse and Nassau, the initiator of the exhibition, explains the purpose of the exhibition, “We wanted people to consider if it is possible to be blessed by a machine, or if a human being is needed.”<sup>20</sup> In medical and psychological services, chatbots are promoted to give medical advice, companionship to older people, or counselling for mental issues. It will not take long before some pastoral roles will be simulated into some “AI priest.” In Kyoto, Japan, a robot priest is already providing blessings and teaching in a Buddhist Temple in the form of Minder, a personification of Kannon, the God of Mercy.<sup>21</sup>

The final challenge we will consider here is the notion of eternal life through mind uploading and humanity's eschatological hope in a hybrid human-machine life. While this is mainly found among transhumanist advocates, it suggests a concept of eternity in which the human soul is understood as a form of digital construction.<sup>22</sup> The future is proposed as shaped by a combination of nanotech, biotech, information tech, and cognitive tech in which humanity will transcend biological limitations.<sup>23</sup> One start-up company Eternime,

founded by MIT Fellow Marius Ursache, seeks to provide a digital spirit of a person that can continue to exist for one's loved ones.<sup>24</sup> In the future, digital immortality will create a community where a living person can continue living with a Virtual Deceased Person (VDP) in a postmortal society.<sup>25</sup> The apps will combine all digital scraps, such as pictures, histories, Facebook entries, etc., to create a digital avatar that mimics one's mannerisms, memories, and personality. Another web app, Replika, offers a service to create an AI friend that can be one companion as it can mirror one's personality or others, such as a deceased friend, family, or idol.<sup>26</sup> These apps reflect some of the deeper yearn in human existence. They find currency among the users because human longing for eternity, spirituality, and connection is real and substantial.

### Further Theological Questions about Strong AI

In this part, I will only briefly touch on some theological questions about the scenario of the existence of strong AI. While this is not a reality yet, some tech enthusiasts believe this is just a matter of time, predicting that the world will witness the first AGI before the end of the 21st century.<sup>27</sup> While tech enthusiasts do not always predict accurately, some critical questions arise from this scenario. In fact, at the moment, some anthropological studies have shown that some form of rudi-

<sup>19</sup>“Church of England Offers Prayers Read by Amazon's Alexa,” *BBC News*, accessed October 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-44233053>.

<sup>20</sup>Harriet Sherwood, “Robot Priest Unveiled in Germany to Mark 500 Years since Reformation.” *The Guardian*, accessed October 21, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/30/robot-priest-blessu-2-germany-reformation-exhibition>.

<sup>21</sup>“God and Robots: Will AI Transform Religion?” *BBC News*, accessed October 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/technology-58983047>.

<sup>22</sup>Victoria Lorrimar, “Mind Uploading and Embodied Cognition: A Theological Response,” *Zygon* 54, no. 1 (March, 2019): 191–193, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12481>.

<sup>23</sup>Beth Singler, “Existential Hope And Existential Despair in AI Apocalypticism and Transhumanism,” *Zy-*

*gon* 54, no. 1 (March, 2019): 156, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12494>.

<sup>24</sup>Michelle Starr, “Eternime Wants You to Live Forever as a Digital Ghost,” *CNET*, April 21, 2017, <https://www.cnet.com/news/eternime-wants-you-to-live-forever-as-a-digital-ghost/>.

<sup>25</sup>Joshua Hurtado, “Towards a Postmortal Society of Virtualised Ancestors? The Virtual Deceased Person and the Preservation of the Social Bond,” *Mortality* 28, no. 1 (2023): 90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2021.1878349>.

<sup>26</sup>Chiara Wilkinson, “The People in Intimate Relationships With AI Chatbots,” *VICE*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/93bqbp/can-you-be-in-relation-ship-with-replika>.

<sup>27</sup>Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near*, 113.

mentary agency, comparable to common pets such as cats, dogs, or rabbits, have been assigned to pet robots.<sup>28</sup>

In response to a robot designer who kicked his dog-robot, one tweet responded, “Kicking a dog, even a robot dog, just seems so wrong”.<sup>29</sup> While no one would assign a moral weight when somebody kicked a tree, the general public responded differently about a pet robot. The response is more intense when a robotic machine exemplifies familiar forms from daily human life. If a robot is built in humanoid form, people start to treat the robot similarly to human beings. In 2017, Saudi Arabia even granted citizenship to Sofia, a robot a Hong Kong Company created.<sup>30</sup> Some people started to talk about robots’ rights and how future society should be arranged about daily reality in which robots become part of society.<sup>31</sup>

Four questions arise in the scenario where the world arrives at the Singularity, a term commonly used for when strong AI would exist. The first question is about Robots and pain. This sensation is widely found among animals but is particularly important for humans. On the contrary, a thing would never be attributed to pain. In human beings, pain is not only a physical sensation but also an emotional or spiritual experience. While, in general, pain is not something we desire, a painful experience is not an entirely useless experience. In the Christian faith, suffering is central to the narrative of salvation. Would a

strong AI be capable of pain? Or, if it is dependent on the programmer, should a strong AI be designed with some form of pain, albeit a robotic pain? And, if so, is it morally justifiable to create such a robot?

The second question is about society. Not only human beings but animals also have some form of organization. A human being is a social being. In the law, the harshest punishment is solitary confinement, intended for the most dangerous criminals. In the Christian faith, relationality is part of the *imago Dei*. How about a strong AI? Can we think of an AI as a real friend, having a real friendship with a human being? In 2017, the world was introduced to an engineer in China who married a robot he built.<sup>32</sup> This was indeed an extreme case. But the question about robot companionship becomes more critical when robot companions are widely used for playing with children and serving older people. Can robots provide genuine friendship to human beings? And concerning a church’s service, should robots participate in Christian worship? And if so, in what capacity? Should robots help a family in prayer and answer the question of faith? Should the churches in Indonesia follow in the footsteps of the Church of England in using Alexa or similar AI, or the church in Germany in providing blessings through a humanoid robot?

The third question is about the morality of machines. Ethics is an integral part of everything we do in the world. Everyone from every walk of life is engaged in ethical questions in science, economy, industry, and politics. Concerning a strong AI, can a machine engage in moral deliberation? Indeed, there is a question about ethical considerations and guidelines in writing an AI program. The programmers must ask what it means for an AI to be morally upright. The morality of a

<sup>28</sup>Mark Coeckelbergh, “Why Care About Robots? Empathy, Moral Standing, and the Language of Suffering,” *Kairos Journal of Philosophy & Science* 20, no. 1 (June 2018): 141–58, <https://doi.org/10.2478/kjps-2018-0007>.

<sup>29</sup>Phoebe Parke, “Is It Cruel to Kick a Robot Dog?” *CNN*, February 13, 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/13/tech/spot-robot-dog-google/index.html>.

<sup>30</sup>Alistair Walsh, “Saudi Arabia Grants Citizenship to Robot Sophia.” *DW*, October 28, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-grants-citizenship-to-robot-sophia/a-41150856>.

<sup>31</sup>See further discussion in David J. Gunkel, *Robot Rights* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2018), 1-48.

<sup>32</sup>Benjamin Haas, “Chinese Man ‘Marries’ Robot He Built Himself,” *The Guardian*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/04/chinese-man-marries-robot-built-himself>.

machine is a fascinating topic of inquiry that Christian ethicists and theologians should grapple with.

The fourth question is about consciousness and personhood. This is a controversial issue, and many scientists have different opinions about personhood. Personhood is related to the soul, spirituality, consciousness, and free will.<sup>33</sup> But not every scientist has the same opinion about the criteria of “the ghost” in the shell, or in this case, “a ghost in the machine.” As such, the question of consciousness and whether a machine would achieve it one day is a hotly debated topic.

### **The Priesthood of All Sentients? An Initial Theological Response**

In this part, rather than giving a comprehensive theological response, we will only provide some initial theological reflections on the development of AI. Several doctrinal loci have been explored to give a theological evaluation of AI. The themes of God and humanity have been studied in this regard.<sup>34</sup> Also, the themes of creation and human ethical responsibilities.<sup>35</sup> These essential themes will contribute to a constructive proposal when the church decides on this development. As explored above, the questions of robots’ suffering, morality, personhood, and companionship have been raised by ethicists and scientists alike. These will continue to be an ex-

ceedingly important topic in various cross-discipline conversations.<sup>36</sup>

Our reflection will be focused on ecclesiology, particularly the nature of church service. We begin with the meaning of Luther’s doctrinal proposition of the “priesthood of all believers.” In his *Address to the German Nobility*, Luther states, “For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already consecrated priest, bishop, and pope, though it is not seemly that everyone should exercise the office.”<sup>37</sup> Luther and his reformation indeed opened essential conversations on the nature of the church ministry. He challenged the clergy’s privileges in monopolizing the service of God’s grace. Luther was right to open the priesthood to all believers. Karl Barth, the Swiss-Reformed theologian, expanded this concept that all believers are priests and theologians. Barth states, “In the Church, there are no non-theologians. The concept ‘layman’ is one of the worst concepts in religious terminology, a concept that should be eliminated from the Christian vocabulary.”<sup>38</sup> Can we expand the concept of the priesthood of all believers into robotic and AI sentient beings? If the AI can have some morality, personhood, and suffering, will it be possible to assign church membership and, by that extension, the church’s ministry to the AI?

The answer might be affirmative if the concept of “the priesthood of all believers” is softly mistranslated into “the priesthood of the believer” (singular), which is fashionably

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<sup>33</sup>John Oakes, “The AI Robot Sophia Was Recently given Citizenship. What Issues Does the Production of Ever-More-Intelligent AI Machines like Sophia Raise for Christians?” November 28, 2017, <https://evidenceforchristianity.org/the-ai-robot-sophia-was-recently-given-citizenship-what-issues-does-the-production-of-ever-more-intelligent-ai-machines-like-sophia-raise-for-christians/>.

<sup>34</sup>Ephraim Radner, “Artificial Intelligence: A Theological Perspective,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 36, no.1 (2020): 81-83, <https://doi.org/10.3138/TJT-2020-0026>.

<sup>35</sup>Tripp Parker and Albert Erisman, “Artificial Intelligence: A Theological Perspective,” *Ethix* 71, no.2 (June 2019): 99-100, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2019/PSCF6-19ErismanParker.pdf>.

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<sup>36</sup>See also, Edmund Furse, “The Theology of Robots.” *New Blackfriars* 67, no. 795 (1986): 377-386. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1986.tb06559.x>. Gatot Gunarso et al. “Artificial Intelligence in a Christian Perspective of Humanity and Personhood,” *International Dialogues on Education Journal* 9, no. 1 (2022): 176–191, <https://doi.org/10.53308/ide.v9i1.279>.

<sup>37</sup>Martin. Luther, *Address to the German Nobility Concerning Christian Liberty* (Champaign, IL: Project Gutenberg, 1999), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1911/1911-h/1911-h.htm>.

<sup>38</sup>Karl Barth, *God in Action* (New York: Round Table Press, 1936), 56-57.

understood in this way as a modern interpretation against the background of clericalism of the 15th century.<sup>39</sup> The notion is thus understood as promoting individualism, liberal freedom, and personal decision. In this construct, it is possible to imagine a future where the church will designate an advanced AI to offer a self-service religious blessing to provide oneself with a spiritual experience. But the true meaning of the phrase is instead directed originally to the body of Christ as a community of saints that all members are a priest to each other.<sup>40</sup> The community of the saints is transcendent, marked as one holy, universal, and apostolic body, made possible by the life and resurrection of Christ. By nature, the church is a creature of the Word of God.<sup>41</sup> For a truly theological understanding of the church, the ultimate reality of the church is Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup> As Barth argues, the true nature of reality is not defined by observational deduction but by the eschatological reality brought about by the resurrection of Christ.<sup>43</sup> That means that eschatology has an ontological priority over human experience and invention. The true reality of the church is its transcendence and immanence in Jesus Christ, and it is not a private or imaginative construct.<sup>44</sup>

Church service and ministry is not merely human institution to provide a sociological service. It is, by nature, transcendence because it is a supernatural grace made possible by the resurrection of Christ. It is Christ's

<sup>39</sup>Timothy George, "The Priesthood of All Believers," *First Things*, October 31, 2016, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/10/the-priesthood-of-all-believers>.

<sup>40</sup>George, "The Priesthood of All Believers."

<sup>41</sup>Denni Boy Saragih, "Disruptive Presence: The Ontology, Theology, and Ethics of Reading the Bible as Scripture in Karl Barth's Exegesis" (PhD Thesis, the University of Edinburgh, 2016) 141-151, <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/21016?show=full>.

<sup>42</sup>Saragih, "Disruptive Presence," 145

<sup>43</sup>Ingolf U. Dalfert, "Karl Barth's Eschatological Realism," in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. Stephen Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 14-17.

<sup>44</sup>Saragih, "Disruptive Presence," 142.

service to the world through His people. It is a present entity but does not belong to the present because, by nature, it is made for the future, animated by the power of the future, i.e., the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, to witness to the present. All the members are not simply individuals who decide to be part of a social group. It is a family bound together by faith in Jesus Christ and the reality brought about by the power of God. While the sociological reality of the church is fragmented and divided by human organization, the true nature of the church is her eschatological being as one Body of Christ, which is a proleptic reality, already "here and now" in the everyday life of the congregation. We contend that this reality is eclipsed when a humanoid machine mediates the church's service.

Unlike the possibility of AI having genuine relationships with others, a human being is already in a relationship inherent to its nature as a human person.<sup>45</sup> The whole question of personhood in AI is built upon the assumption that ontology starts from a substance into personal and, finally, interpersonal. However, humanity as a created being is interpersonal from the beginning, both in essence and existence. One is born into a family and results from two opposite-sex relationships. As such, "being in a relationship" is the proper theological nature of humanity. But the basic theological nature of humanity is its relationship with God as the Creator and the Father of all. Human existence as "being in communion" is first and foremost as being in communion with God. This is the true nature of human personhood, i.e., being in communion with God. In other words, our existence is dependent on the love of God, so instead of "I think, therefore I am," the true theological meaning of humanity is "God loves me, therefore I am." God's transcendence in human existence is already immanence since the very beginning

<sup>45</sup>John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2004), 18.



of its authentic personhood. In this regard, to be a person is to participate in the transcendence, e.i., in the divine life of the Triune God. Human participation in God's life is ontologically basic to human nature. God's Triune life in communion is reiterated in the reality ad extra of God's life. It is this reality that is genuinely the nature of human personhood, that is, being human is being in communion.

### **CONCLUSION: THE ECLIPSE OF TRANSCENDENCE**

AI development will rapidly and surprisingly unfold in the near future. It might not be exactly as predicted by scientists. However, the dynamic interplay that governs that development is nothing new. The old and familiar motif drives all the giant companies and the empire of the old, that is, human greed and thirst for more and more. C. S. Lewis aptly observes this ancient phenomenon, "Man's power over nature turns out to be power exerted by some men over other men."<sup>46</sup> AI technology can enrich human life, but it also can be a tool for some people to exploit others.

In this theological reflection, we want to highlight some eclipses of transcendence in popular hype. First, many AI narratives are built upon the preconception that interprets humanity in material form. Human is a kind of machine. Human thought is similar to algorithms. This is a form of machine anthropomorphism in which human understanding of machines is applied to understand human thinking. In a similar vein, personhood is understood in materialist understanding. Human personhood is only a more complex interaction of extensive and various components of simpler material. It can be simplified into computational logic. The same can be said of companionship. It is a simulated dynamics that can be designed and imple-

mented into a machine. And finally, morality is a programmed purpose that serves the desire and dream of the programmer. All is understood as a form of materialist expression of human spirituality. It is understandable if the eternal life is then interpreted by uploading the "self" into the network as a ghost in the network. In all of these materialist interpretations of human life, the eclipse of transcendence by a binary mechanism of pure materialism is what happens.

Nevertheless, Christian theology should not be wary of the future. God is the God of the future, and the future belongs to God. It is the nature of the church as the creature of the Word, created for the future, to witness and proclaim the gospel in the present. Christ is the hope of the world. AI technology will be incorporated into the life of society. In the proclamation of the Gospel, the program, the programmer, and the owner that funded them all are called to be the servant of God's Kingdom and, in that regard, glorify the wisdom and creativity of the Triune God. In this spirit, the church and its theologians must continue to develop a further theological response to the development of AI. As with many other powerful technologies, it has the potential to bring great good or cause severe damage to human flourishing.<sup>47</sup> As the bearer of God's image, it is our duty to direct technology development for the greatest good. It demands wisdom and care; we should never delegate the duty to machines.

### **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

#### **Author's Contributions and Responsibilities**

I am responsible for the analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the research results. I have read and approved the final manuscript.

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<sup>46</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 55.

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<sup>47</sup>Robinson, "Introduction," 8-9.

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I have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately affected them in writing this article.

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