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6-2022

## A Theological Framework for Reflection on Artificial Intelligence

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### Recommended Citation

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# 4

## A Theological Framework for Reflection on Artificial Intelligence

Michael D. Langford

### THE NECESSITY AND INEVITABILITY OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

On the first Sunday of Lent, the Orthodox Church celebrates the “Feast of Orthodoxy,” which commemorates the official restoration of the use of icons in worship by Empress Theodora in AD 843, ending a period of disputation in the Byzantine Church known as the “iconoclastic controversy.” Icons are pieces of sacred artwork that are used in the practice of worship. In the Middle Ages, those who opposed the use of icons claimed that it violated the Second Commandment, which forbids the use of idols, and that it heretically attempts to circumscribe the ineffable transcendence of God. Proponents of icon use pointed out that icons are not idols because they are not worshipped. Rather, icons are “venerated,” meaning that they are highly valued or revered, as “windows into heaven”; icons are not understood to be

God, but rather are a means to reflect on God and be viscerally drawn into the presence of God.<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, icons are pieces of technology. They represent the application of knowledge to solve a problem—in this case, the problem of how to worship God—which, because problems exist in created reality, inevitably use creaturely media. In other words, technology involves novel techniques and tools that interact with their environment. Religions have never existed apart from technology because religion exists in the midst of people who must interact with their world. However, religion and technology have always had an up-and-down relationship, and the iconoclastic controversy is an apt example. Anything new to a canon of tradition is adopted critically, and new technologies are no exception; it can take centuries of careful theological deliberation to garner the wisdom to best employ the introduction of any particular technology to a religious tradition. Notice that, in the iconoclastic controversy, the use of icons was neither denigrated nor affirmed based on their novelty, but rather on deeply held theological convictions.

Artificial intelligence has emerged more rapidly than nearly any technology in history. The rate of development and adoption of AI has meant that our digital wisdom is still catching up. For Christians, this digital wisdom must include theology, or what we have to say about God and the world from the perspective of faith.<sup>2</sup> In short, theological reflection on AI is in dire need as these technologies become more and more ingrained in our lives every day.<sup>3</sup>

In much the same way that we might say that technology ineluctably develops as humanity interacts with the world around it, we might also say that theology ineluctably develops as Christians interact with the world around them. Christianity did not begin as a bundle of theoretical propositions. Rather, Christianity began with a group of people following Jesus,

1. For more on the historical particularities of the iconoclastic controversy and the theological and liturgical arguments for and against the use of icons and images, see Pelikan, *Spirit of Eastern Christendom*, 91–145.

2. Scottish theologian John Macquarrie helpfully defines theology as “the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available.” Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 1. Note that this definition takes into account a perception of God that is possible through the participation in faith, which enables a certain kind of knowing.

3. Futurist Martin Ford notes that “it is becoming evident that AI is poised to become one of the most important forces shaping our world. Unlike more specialized innovations, artificial intelligence is becoming a true general-purpose technology. In other words, it is evolving into a utility—not unlike electricity—that is likely to ultimately scale across every industry, every sector of our economy, and nearly every aspect of science, society and culture.” Ford, *Architects of Intelligence*, 2.

coming to believe in him as the Christ and his teachings about the kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup> While it is certainly true that what Jesus had to say to his disciples included doctrinal ideas, they were often ambiguous, usually analogic, and frequently misunderstood. God did not reveal much theologically to Moses at the Burning Bush when the divine name was given to him; “YHWH” merely means “I am who I am.”<sup>5</sup> It took Moses many years of following God’s direction and trusting God’s promises for him to discover more about who God is, what God says about the world, and what God wanted of him and his people. In the same way, the disciples mostly did not understand who Jesus was during his lifetime; it was only after his resurrection that they came to understand more clearly who Jesus was, what he had to say about the world, and what he wanted of them. Likewise, it took many years after the time of Jesus for Christians to come to understand more clearly who God is in light of the Christ.

In fact, the text of the New Testament might be seen precisely as the work of Christ-followers as they worked out, in thought and language, their theology in consideration of questions that came up, or they believed would come up, in their interactions with others. The Gospel of Matthew appears to be written by a Jewish Christian, explaining in terms of that culture and religion about the person and work of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the Gospel of Luke is striking for its Gentile character, explaining Jesus within that cultural milieu.<sup>7</sup> Paul famously spoke on the Areopagus to the Athenians, connecting

4. Church historian Bernhard Lohse notes that, in response to Jesus’s question to his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?,” the first expression of dogma was Peter’s confession of faith, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:15–16). Theology developed as followers of Jesus worked out the expanding meaning of this basic confession as they encountered other spheres of life. See Lohse, *Short History of Christian Doctrine*, 8–12.

5. Exod 3:14.

6. The Jewish character of Matthew’s Gospel is evident from its many references to the Old Testament, and assumptions concerning the knowledge of the reader. In fact, Matthew’s connection to the Old Testament is a likely reason that it was placed first in the New Testament canon. “The narrator of Matthew’s Gospel exhibits a repeated concern to identify particular events in Jesus’s life as the direct fulfillments of specific Jewish Scriptures.” Nienhuis, *Concise Guide to Reading the New Testament*, 21–22.

7. The character of Luke is such that it seems it was constructed to appeal to a Gentile audience characteristic of the Mediterranean world. “Luke’s Gospel begins with one, long, carefully composed sentence that is notable *not* for its theological claims but for its undeniable *secularity*. Scholars have long observed that Luke has deliberately constructed this opening in imitation of the Hellenistic historians and biographers of his age: from the acknowledgement of other available Gospels, to the listing of his credentials as a historian and the dedication to his patron ‘Theophilus,’ this piece of Holy Scripture begins much the same as any worldly history would have in the first-century Greco-Roman world.” Nienhuis, *Concise Guide to Reading the New Testament*, 51.

their beliefs and questions to an understanding of the God of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> And the many epistles from Paul and others work out who God is, what God has to say about the world, and what God would have us do in light of what is going on in different contexts. It is when we encounter new contexts that new questions emerge that demand theological reflection. This is what is meant by the dictum: mission is “the mother of theology.”<sup>9</sup> So we see a new opportunity: As we embrace God’s mission in a world of AI, we must theologically grapple with this new means of technology.

The theological questions before us in a digital age are pressing. What does God think of AI? Is AI good or evil? Will AI save us? What sort of future will AI give us? In what follows, I want to briefly introduce a few theological concepts that will hopefully help equip us for theological reflection on AI. We will begin with the question of epistemology, or how it is that we come by knowledge; in the realm of theology, this centers on revelation. We will then touch on the doctrine of creation, including the understanding of what it means to be a human creature. Next, we will review aspects of the doctrine of salvation. Finally, we will discuss eschatology, the study of “last things.” I will close by posing some thoughts on what and how theology fits within our evolving digital wisdom.

## REVELATION

Theology is always heretical. By that I mean that, despite our best efforts and faithful devotion, what we have to say about God will never be fully correct. We will always be wrong to some degree. How could it be otherwise? In theology, we are speaking about something that we cannot speak about, using words and thoughts of our universe to describe a being that, as its creator, is ontologically different than our universe. Yet, God gave us our ability to think and communicate, and God provided us with means within our created reality to know who God is—the beauty of nature, the proclamations of God’s people, our internal orientation toward beauty and goodness, and the incarnation of God’s self-expression.<sup>10</sup> Because God’s revelation comes to

8. See Acts 17:16–34.

9. Kähler, *Schriften zur Chrisologie und Mission*, 190.

10. Athanasius makes the argument that humanity should have been able to know “God the Word” merely by means of its own creation in the “Divine Image” (12.1). However, in light of human “forgetfulness” and “weakness,” God provided other ways: “the harmony of creation,” the words of “holy men,” and “by knowing the law even, to cease from all lawlessness and live a virtuous life.” Yet, this was not sufficient; Athanasius likens the renewal of a defaced painting to the work of God renewing the divine image in creation. This is because humanity “rejected the contemplation of God, and with

us through creaturely media, we have no other recourse in response than to think and talk about God with our own words, though we do so humbly and with great respect, knowing we will never be fully right. This is why Thomas Aquinas called theological language neither univocal (exactly right) nor equivocal (exactly wrong), but rather analogical.<sup>11</sup>

In Romans 12, Paul encourages believers to resist being “conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God” (Rom 12:2).<sup>12</sup> Paul calls the Roman Christians toward theological reflection that is grounded not only in sound doctrine, but also in the practice of Christian love; he urges them to “not to think of yourself more highly than you ought” (12:3), to “let love be genuine” (12:9), and to “live in harmony with one another” (12:16). He thus affirms the necessity of community for Christian life, reminding them that we are “one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (12:5). One of the markers of this one-but-many community is the diversity of people and abilities therein. “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness” (12:6–8). The work of theological reflection is therefore not merely an exercise in the exegesis of biblical texts or existential dilemmas, nor is it merely the result of reasoned reflection on observation or traditional beliefs; the process of the practice of theology is carried out in the midst of a diverse community grounded in spiritual practices and mutual love.

In the verse above, the words “in proportion to faith” (Greek: *kata ten analogia tes pisteos*) have taken on a great deal of meaning. The verse seems to be saying that gifts of faith (such as prophecy, which is speaking the truth of God) are given in accordance with, or proportionate to, the faith of the giftee. This is clearly presented not as a matter of ranking gifts, as if the more faithful get the more profound gifts, but rather seems to be explaining the

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their eyes downward, as though sunk in the deep, were seeking about for God in nature and in the world of sense, feigning gods for themselves of mortal men and demons; to this end the loving and general Saviour of all, the Word of God, takes to Himself a body, and as Man walks among men and meets the senses of all men half-way, to the end, I say, that they who think that God is corporeal may from what the Lord effects by His body perceive the truth, and through Him recognize the Father.” Athanasius, “On the Incarnation,” §12, 14, and 15.

11. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.5–6.

12. All Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version.

existence of differences as a matter of course. In other words, since everyone's faith looks different, so will the gifts of the faithful.<sup>13</sup>

However, these same Greek words can also be translated as "according to the measure of the faith," which some have taken to mean that Paul was advocating that the words of those who claim to prophecy, or speak God's words, should be measured against the *content* of the faith of the believers: "Well then, we have gifts that differ in accordance with the grace that has been given to us, and we must use them appropriately. If it is prophecy, we must prophesy according to the pattern of the faith."<sup>14</sup> That is, if someone speaks and claims it is prophecy, that speech should be judged to be God's revealed truth insofar as it compares favorably with what the Christian community has already judged to be God's revealed truth. This understanding is reflected in the Latin translation of the words "in proportion to faith" as *analogia fidei* or *regula fidei*, which mean "analogy of faith" or "rule of faith," respectively. Thus the term "rule of faith" became used among early Christians, and is still used today, for the ultimate authority in the Christian belief system, such as a creed or a basic profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

The terms "analogy of faith" and "rule of faith" posit the primacy of faith-received revelation in articulating our theology. Swiss theologian Karl Barth was particularly concerned with theology that merely defines God in terms of our own ideologies.<sup>15</sup> Instead, he said, our theology must emerge out of God's self-revelation, principally in the person and work of Jesus Christ, as grasped in faith. Our words about God must mirror God's own Word about God. Thus we do not define God out of an *analogia entis*, or "analogy of being," that merely likens God to our own conceptions of

13. The image of "body" that Paul uses as an analogy for the church illustrates his conception of the gathering of believers to be a unity of diversity. "Paul's comparison of the unity of the Christian community's diverse members and variety of ways of acting to the human body and its various parts rules out any such rigid uniformity. Indeed, the analogy of the body not only allows for, but even emphasizes the necessity of, diversity, a diversity based on the multifaceted abundance of God's grace itself. That rich and multifaceted grace finds expression in the various ways Christians are moved by grace to enact their faith, whether in speech or deed (vv. 6–8)." Achtemeier, *Romans*, 196.

14. This example is the translation given in N. T. Wright's New Testament for Everyone translation. See Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 2*. There are other translations that offer similar interpretations, such as the New Century Version and the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

15. Barth was reacting in particular to the German liberal theologies in the tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, Wilhelm Herrmann, and Adolf von Harnack that, in Barth's mind, sought to redefine Christian dogma in terms of human experience and rationality rather than the revelation of a "wholly other" God. The danger of the liberal approach, asserted Barth, was that it sought to replace God with the individual as the arbiter of theological reflection.

existence. Rather, we must allow God to define God, and we receive that revelation “in accordance to faith,” or via the *analogia fidei*. Barth would say that instead of slavishly adhering to a set of doctrinal principles of our own liking, we must allow faith to be our ruler when it comes to our understanding of God, what God has to say about the world, and how God would have us live. It is God’s revelation in Christ by the power of the Spirit, as grasped in faith, that is the rule of faith.<sup>16</sup>

Christians believe God has provided revelation of truth through different means—through Scripture, or careful deliberation, or our own experiences, or the thoughts of others<sup>17</sup>—but that God has revealed God’s own self in the person and work of Jesus, a revelation that we receive through the work of the Holy Spirit in the gift of faith. It is this self-revelation that governs or rules all other bits of revelation. Thus Christian epistemology, or theory of knowledge, must begin and end with God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Scripture is the Christian’s primary witness to this revelation, though it is not the revelation itself; nevertheless, Scripture is how God’s Word is revealed to us, through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, and is therefore trustworthy and authoritative.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, for theological reflection on AI, we must begin with God’s revelation. We may not remain in the naturalistic realm and merely reach into the theological realm when we need ammunition for whatever we want to say or believe. For it to be *Christian* epistemology, reflection must begin with revelation. This is not to say that God does not use AI in revelation; God will use whatever God wants to use.<sup>19</sup> However, anything that we believe may be revelatory must be measured against what God has already revealed centrally in Christ by the power of the Spirit as witnessed to in Scripture and grasped in faith. We garner knowledge by other means as

16. Thus it is that Barth understands revelation as that which “rules” our faith. “The rule of faith may be understood quite generally as a description of the positive relationship of man to what is prospectively and retrospectively true for all in the light of the epiphany of Jesus Christ, to the divine truths of redemption which are to be proclaimed and heard in all ages and places.” Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 245.

17. Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience are generally understood to be the four sources of theology.

18. Theologian Stanley Grenz notes that the Bible’s authority comes not merely by means of its origin, but by means of its nature as a channel of revelation for the Holy Spirit. “Whatever authority the Bible carries as a trustworthy book, it derives from the trustworthiness of the divine revelation it discloses and ultimately from the Spirit who infallibly speaks through it.” Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 402.

19. Barth makes the point that to limit sources of revelation is to limit God’s freedom. “God may speak to us through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog. We do well to listen to Him if He really does.” Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, 55.

well, of course; for instance, God created the natural sciences as means to understand the world around us, the cosmos surrounding us, and the cells within us. Theology does not compete with science for epistemological primacy; rather, they are complementary. Science, such as that which creates AI, tells us about that which we can observe. Theology tells us about God, what God has to say about the world, and what we must do. Science is built for measuring that which we observe around us in order to build conceptual models useful for interacting with our world in myriad ways. Theology is built for understanding God, reality, and ourselves so that we might understand what things mean and how we must live in relationship to God, others, and the world. And while the epistemological community of science holds itself to objectivity, verifiability, and precision for successful outcomes, the epistemological community of revelation bases its work in love, worship, humility, and obedience.

## CREATION

The first line of the Nicene Creed reads, “I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” To say that God is “maker” means that God is the origin of all existence. Not just rocks and trees and animals, but also atoms and stars—even time and space itself. To say that God created everything is to say that God created *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing. Christianity believes that, before anything existed, God was, and just God was. And then God brought the cosmos into existence.<sup>20</sup> This understanding depicts a God who is distinct from creation, prior and foundational to creation, and it also suggests a God who created for some purpose since God did not need to create, being self-subsistent apart from it. We might even go so far as to

20. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes that the nature of Genesis 1 is such that God is denoted as the source and origin of everything, and that we cannot see behind this beginning to make any claims about the creator. Bonhoeffer interprets this to mean that this implies a freedom in God such that God was not conditioned by any necessity. “In the beginning God created heaven and earth. In other words the Creator—in freedom!—creates the creature. The connection between them is conditioned by nothing except freedom, which means that it is unconditioned. This rules out every application of causal categories for an understanding of the creation. The relation between Creator and creature can never be interpreted in terms of cause and effect, because between the Creator and creature there stands no law of thought or law of effect or anything else. Between Creator and creature there is simply *nothing*. For freedom is exercised in, and on the basis of, this nothing. No kind of necessity that could, or indeed had to, ensue in creation can therefore be demonstrated to exist in God. There is simply nothing that provides the ground for creation. Creation comes out of this nothing.” Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 32–33.

imagine that, whatever precisely that purpose is, it is still ongoing since our cosmos is still here.

But God did not stop being creator after the creation of the universe. God continues to be “maker.” While science tells us that new matter does not come into existence since the birth of the universe, that does not mean that God does not continue to make new things. New life comes into existence all the time. New ideas and relationships, too. New mountains and planets and stars come into existence, though very slowly. God creates new realities for us every day. The fact that God is maker does not merely mean that God creates time, space, and matter. It means that God is the one who establishes all sorts of beginnings, without which we and the rest of the cosmos would not exist.<sup>21</sup> We might even say that God continues to exhibit divine creatorship in the birth and development of technologies such as AI, through humans of course, just as we might say that God exhibits divine creatorship in the birth and development of friendships or vaccines or art. This does not mean that God’s creations are not misused, but merely that God continues to create because God is maker.

The Bible begins with the saga of creation. Within it, we are told of the uniqueness of humanity among this creation; humans seem to be the climax of God’s work in Genesis 1, and, among creatures, have a special interactivity with God in Genesis 2. This is not to say that God does not value the rest of creation; to the contrary, God calls creation “good” several times in Genesis 1, and God calls the completed creation “very good” in Genesis 1:31 (Hebrew: *tov me’od*).<sup>22</sup> However, the text of Genesis suggests

21. Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware points out that the nature of God as creator means that God is continually creating. “In saying that God is Creator of the world, we do not mean merely that he set things in motion by an initial act ‘at the beginning,’ after which they go on functioning by themselves. God is not just a cosmic clockmaker, who winds up the machinery and then leaves it to keep ticking on its own. On the contrary, creation is *continual*. If we are to be accurate when speaking of creation, we should not use the past tense but the continuous present. We should say, not ‘God made the world, and me in it,’ but ‘God is *making* the world, and me in it, here and now, at this moment and always.’ Creation is not an event in the past, but a relationship in the present. If God did not continue to exert his creative will at every moment, the universe would immediately lapse into non-being; nothing could exist for a single second if God did not will it to be.” Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 45. God’s “making the world” is found not merely in bringing matter into being *ex nihilo*, but also in the formation of character, virtue, relationships, ideas, affection, and the like.

22. “If everything and everyone that the sovereign God made is *tov me’od*, then to be what the Creator intended must also be good—creatureliness is good.” Brunner, Butler, and Swoboda, *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology*, 119. This intrinsic goodness of creation is born out of the goodness of God. “As intended by God, creation is good. Indeed, it is very good (*tov me’od*), a judgement that connotes beauty and peace. The universe originates not out of struggle or battle or conflict, as portrayed in so many

that God has a central relationship with humans in the midst of creation. In Genesis 1, humans are the only creatures that are bestowed the image of God: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). In Latin, “image of God” is *imago Dei*, a concept that is central to theological reflection on the nature of humanity, or “theological anthropology.”

Christianity emphasizes the importance of the *imago Dei* to theological anthropology because it asserts the sacredness of every person and points to the foundational factor that differentiates humans from other creatures, constituting some sort of indelible element to human nature. It also communicates a qualitative connection between humanity and God, though Scripture is silent on precisely what the essence of that connection is. This textual vacuum has, over the years, led many theologians to fill it with their own preferred cultural values, identifying different abilities or capacities in humans as constituting the *imago Dei*.<sup>23</sup> Some have asserted that the *imago Dei* is rationality, claiming that is what is central to being human. Others have stated that it is free will, communality, ethicality, or creativity. Ironically, these claims subtly arrogate qualities that are central to God, thus circularly affirming what we like best about ourselves. For example, if I really like human creativity, I could posit: “Well, the creed says that God is maker, and we are created in God’s image, so we must be makers, too!” Of course, when we do that, we are merely picking the aspect of God that we like the most about ourselves.<sup>24</sup> However, there is nothing in Genesis or the rest of Scripture that identifies precisely what constitutes the *imago Dei*, or if it is indeed an ability or capacity.<sup>25</sup> It seemed enough for the authors of Genesis to declare humanity as created in the image of God, identifying humans as distinct and special, and leave it at that. This seems theologically important, for if the *imago Dei* were reducible to an ability of capacity, it would rank the extent to which the image of God resides in individuals.<sup>26</sup>

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ancient creation stories, but through a seemingly effortless and struggle-free divine speaking and making. In contrast to other narratives, the biblical narrative testifies to an ontology of peace.” Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 88.

23. In a helpful review of different theological attempts to identify the *imago Dei*, theologian and computer scientist Noreen Herzfeld identifies substantive, functional, and relational approaches. See Herzfeld, *In Our Image*, 10–32.

24. German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach made just this point about religion: we create God in our image. “[Religion is] nothing else than the consciousness of the infinity of the consciousness; or, in the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for his object the infinity of his own nature.” Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, 21.

25. “Scriptural references to the creation of humans in the image of God are few and in no way tell us of what that image consists.” Herzfeld, *In Our Image*, 14.

26. For a more extended treatment, through the lens of disability theology, of how

I bring up the *imago Dei* here to show that, while humans and AI are both part of God's good creation, there is something distinct, theologically speaking, about humanity, no matter how "smart" AI gets. Perhaps an aspect of that distinction is found in the same verse as another declaration of the *imago Dei*: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'" (Gen 1:26). The word "dominion" is *radah* in Hebrew, and it can also be translated as "stewardship"; God seems to position humans here in a position of vice-regency, as those who exercise God's will in the midst of and to creation.<sup>27</sup> This idea is deepened in Genesis 2:15, when humans are commanded to "till" and "keep" creation; these two Hebrew verbs, *abad* and *shamar*, are horticultural terms that can also be translated as "serve" and "protect."<sup>28</sup> It seems that Genesis portrays a humanity that is meant to care for the rest of creation, including humans, helping it to fulfill its divine purpose.

One of the ways that humans serve as vice-regents in God's good creation is through the creation and use of technology, including AI. As mentioned above, technology is most basically the application of knowledge to solve a problem, which inevitably is worked out in the midst of the world, and therefore involves the manipulation of creation; it is the novel use of technique and tool. For instance, when the problem was how to get from one place to another faster, certain ideas were imagined, tried, and improved; riding a horse came first, perhaps, and then boats, bikes, cars, trains, and planes. All of these pieces of technology used material from God's creation to make something new, through the imagination and smarts of humans endowed with the gifts God had given them and with the commission of

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the identification of *imago Dei* with an ability or capacity ends up marginalizing individuals, see Langford, "Abusing Youth."

27. Theologian Helmut Thielicke connects God's creation of humanity in the midst of many other creatures with God's commission to humanity to steward well all of God's creation. "For, after all, we are not to rule and subdue the earth because we stand *above* the other creatures, but only because we stand *under* God and are privileged to be his viceroys. But being a viceroy of the Creator is something different from being a creature who makes of himself a god or at least a superman." Thielicke, *How the World Began*, 67.

28. "Genesis 2:15 . . . defines the human calling in terms of service: we are to serve (*abad*) and protect (*shamar*). We are to serve and protect the garden that is creation—literally, to be slaves to the earth for its own good, as well as for our own benefit. Taking [the Genesis] texts seriously implies that dominion must be defined in terms of service. We are called to dominion as service." Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 64. The latter verb, *shamar*, is the same verb as in the Aaronic blessing, "The Lord bless you and keep (*shamar*) you" (Num 6:24). See Brunner et al., *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology*, 26.

vice-regency. Human technologies have not always been imagined, developed, or used well, but they are bits of God's creation, and therefore are no less "good" than any other part of it, even if they are a strange new re-configuration of that creation. Such is true of AI as well, and therefore we do well to remember our commission in our creation and employment of it.

## SALVATION

If technology is the application of knowledge to solve a problem using creaturely techniques and tools, then we might imagine salvation as being God's technology. The word "salvation" literally means the state of being saved, which implies being saved from something, being saved to something, and a means of being saved. Biblically, theologically, and culturally, these three aspects of salvation take on a lot of different shapes in Christianity. We will look at each. However, it is first important to note that Christians believe that it is God who saves. In fact, that is one of the main dictums of Judaism that Christianity has inherited: Only God can save.<sup>29</sup> This is one of the reasons that early Christians settled on identifying Jesus as having the nature of full divinity; if Jesus is not fully God, then Jesus does not fully save us.<sup>30</sup> In fact, Jesus's name in the original Hebrew is *Yeshua*, which means "God saves."

From what does God save us? Very generally speaking, Christians believe that God saves us from all those things that go against the will of God in our lives and in the world. The theological concept for this is "sin."<sup>31</sup> Sin

29. God as the source of salvation is a theme seen throughout the Old Testament. "I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior" (Isa 43:11); "Deliverance belongs to the Lord; may your blessing be on your people!" (Ps 3:8); "Yet I have been the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior" (Hos 13:4).

30. The Jewish theme of God as savior is applied to the person and work of Jesus in the New Testament. This is typified in Peter's speech to the council of religious authorities: "There is salvation in no one else [than Jesus Christ], for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we may be saved" (Acts 4:12). This connection between the saving work of God uniquely in Jesus Christ formed the soteriological bedrock of the Christian faith. "Christianity holds that salvation—however that is subsequently defined—is linked with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This interconnection of Jesus Christ with the achievement of salvation has been characteristic of Christian theology down through the ages. While a wide range of metaphors are used in the New Testament and the Christian tradition to describe the transformation of the human situation through redemption, all of them converge on the person of Jesus Christ as their ultimate ground and goal." McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 248.

31. In the *Large Catechism*, in addressing "Holy Baptism," Martin Luther provides a classic summary of those things from which we are saved: "But to be saved, we know, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil, and to enter into the

means literally “missing the mark,” and refers to that which transgresses the nature of creation as God intends it, seminally imaged in Genesis 3 as human rejection of the way of God.<sup>32</sup> Sins can be acts of commission or omission and are not necessarily intentional. But we might also say that “sin” is a state of being and not merely a series of acts; for instance, one might say that we live in a “sinful world,” meaning that we exist within a reality thoroughly infected with the effects of human sin, with results such as isolation, systems of marginalization, violence, ecological degradation, and other maladies. Scripture uses a number of images to describe sin including, for instance, bondage, death, disobedience, disease, and ignorance. Like most theological notions, sin is not a straightforward concept, but it seems enough to think of sin as that which goes against God’s will, and thus indicates life and reality and a trajectory that is not as it should be. It is not hard for us to look around us and find that to be the case.

To what does God save us? Very generally speaking, Christians believe that God saves us and the world to that state for which we and it were created. Just as Scripture uses many images for sin, so does it also use many images for salvation including liberation, new life, redemption, healing, and *shalom*. The diversity of these images suggests the multidimensional holism of salvation, in which God reconciles all things to how they ought to be. God saves all of creation from the sin that plagues it. Postmodernism has helped us to see that reality includes a panoply of relationships such that all things exist, and can only be understood, in their connection to other things. Thus it is that humans exist in relationship with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation.<sup>33</sup> Followingly, we might understand salvation as a re-creation of

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kingdom of Christ, and to live with Him forever” (IV.25). In essence, these things work against God and hold humanity in bondage. We are here using “sin” as a theological catchall.

32. Theologian Daniel Migliore says, “If we are created for relationship with God who is wholly different from us and for relationship with other creatures who are relatively different from us, sin is a denial of our essential relatedness to those who are genuinely ‘other.’ We deny our dependence on the Other who is God and reject our need for our fellow creatures, most particularly those who seem so totally strange and ‘other’ to us—the victim, the poor, the ‘leftover person.’” Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 150. However, theologian Howard Snyder expands this notion of sin as broken relationship to a wider “ecology of sin”: “In alienating man and woman from God, human disobedience introduced three other kinds of alienation that are with us still. Here is the ecology of sin: alienation from God, internal alienation within each person (alienation from oneself), alienation between humans, and alienation from and within nature. These are the spiritual, psychological, social, and environmental alienations that afflict the whole human family.” Snyder, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 68.

33. “The good news of Jesus and his kingdom addresses the whole ecology of sin, as [2 Cor 5:17–19] suggests—‘reconciling the world to himself. All the multiple

right relationship between humans and God, between humans and themselves, between humans, and between humans and the rest of creation. This multidimensional relationality is implied in the *ordo salutis*, Latin for “order of salvation,” which describes different aspects of salvation: election, justification, sanctification, vocation, and glorification.<sup>34</sup> First of all, God “elects” or freely chooses salvation for the cosmos.<sup>35</sup> Second, we are justified or “made right” with God in that our relationship with God is set to what it is meant to be, one in which God is God and we are creatures who trust and obey God. Third, we are sanctified or “made holy” in that our lives are accorded to an existence of loving relationship with God and others. Fourth, we embrace our vocation in that we participate in God’s call for us to be vice-regents in God’s work of cosmic reconciliation. Fifth, all things are finally set according to the will and glory of God.

What are the means of salvation? It should be noted that Scripture is less interested in proclaiming the metaphysics of salvation than it is in proclaiming the fact of salvation.<sup>36</sup> The “what” is asserted but the “why”

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dimensions of sin and alienation are implied here, as in many other passages. *The ecology of salvation is as full and comprehensive as the ecology of sin.* Anything less is not the whole gospel for the whole world—not wholistic mission.” Snyder, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 147. In the same way that sin infects all reality, so does salvation affect all reality.

34. This *ordo salutis* is based on, though not a reproduction of, aspects listed in Rom 8:30. Two things should be noted here. First, there are many different opinions concerning an ordering of salvation; different theologians have different perspectives on what salvation consists of and the ordering of aspects within the process of salvation. Second, in presenting an *ordo salutis* here, I am not (necessarily) suggesting a temporal ordering, but rather a logical one. From an individual’s point of view in the course of salvation, it may not appear to have any sort of particular ordering.

35. This is admittedly not how many use the term “election” or “predestination.” I am using it here in the sense that Barth uses it: “The doctrine of election is the sum of the Gospel because of all words that can be said or heard it is the best: that God elects man; that God is for man too the One who loves in freedom. It is grounded in the knowledge of Jesus Christ because He is both the electing God and elected man in One. It is part of the doctrine of God because originally God’s election of man is a predestination not merely of man but of Himself. Its function is to bear basic testimony to eternal, free and unchanging grace as the beginning of all the ways and works of God.” Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, 3.

36. A quote from C. S. Lewis makes this point: “Now before I became a Christian I was under the impression that the first thing Christians had to believe was one particular theory as to what the point of [the Crucifixion] was. According to that theory God wanted to punish men for having deserted and joined the Great Rebel, but Christ volunteered to be punished instead, and so God let us off. Now I admit that even this theory does not seem quite so immoral and silly as it used to; but that is not the point I want to make. What I came to see later on was that neither this theory nor any other is Christianity. The central belief is that Christ’s death has somehow put us right with

is not, or at least not very clearly or univocally. This is, in part, because it is impossible for us to grasp the comprehensiveness of God's salvation, let alone all the ways in which God effects this salvation. Nevertheless, Scripture does portray the person and work of Jesus Christ as the means of salvation. Christians believe that it is through Jesus that we are saved. Based upon what Scripture says about salvation, theologians have often offered "atonement theories," or theorized explanations of precisely how it is that Jesus saves us. One suggestion, often called the "Christus Victor" motif, is that Jesus defeats Satan, the embodiment of that which militates against God's will, and thus releases humanity from bondage.<sup>37</sup> Another suggestion, called "recapitulation theory," portrays Jesus as the "New Adam," who reconstitutes in his life the proper embodiment of humanity, thus healing its defects.<sup>38</sup> Another suggestion, popularized by Anselm in the Middle Ages, is called "satisfaction theory," which states that humanity has, because of sin, incurred a debt to God that must be repaid for the restoration of right relationship, a repayment which is made through Jesus's death on the cross.<sup>39</sup> Yet another suggestion, "moral exemplar theory," states that Jesus has shown us the way to live as people of God, a way that we have forgotten or never fully understood.<sup>40</sup> Regardless of precisely how it is that Jesus heals the cosmos from sin, Christians believe that he does so, constituting an act of salvation that is the work of God alone.

When reflecting on AI in view of Christian notions of salvation, it should be noted immediately that AI cannot be the source of salvation because it is not God, no matter how powerful we may imagine it to be. It

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God and given us a fresh start. Theories as to how it did this are another matter. A good many different theories have been held as to how it works; what all Christians are agreed on is that it does work." Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 53–54.

37. For a helpful review of the prevalence of this model of atonement, sometimes called the "classic view," among theologians in the early church, see Aulén, *Christus Victor*.

38. This theory of atonement is often identified with Irenaeus of Lyon. "He has therefore, in His work of recapitulation, summed up all things, both waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam, and trampled upon his head. . . . And therefore does the Lord profess Himself to be the Son of man, comprising in Himself that original man out of whom the woman was fashioned, in order that, as our species went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one." Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.21.1.

39. See Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo?*, II.4–7. This theory has become a common theological interpretation in Western theological traditions.

40. Though this view is associated with scholastic theologian Peter Abelard (1079–1142), it is also a theory popular in the modern era, especially in liberal theologies that identify Jesus primarily as an enlightened teacher and moral leader.

cannot provide us with right relationship with God, it cannot make us holy, and it cannot call us to be vice-regents of creation. As it says in Revelation 7:10: “Salvation belongs to our God.” This is not to say that God does not use AI in God’s salvific work; God has done, and will presumably continue to do, incredible things through AI. However, ultimately, salvation belongs to God alone. The notion that AI could save us implies at least two things. First of all, it implies that AI could know humanity—not to mention the rest of creation—well enough to know what needs healing. However, Scripture states that it is only God who knows us fully and is therefore uniquely in a position to save us.<sup>41</sup> Knowledge is personal, meaning that it forms in the midst of relationship.<sup>42</sup> We noted above that human knowledge of God emerges in the context of the relationship of faith. God’s knowledge of humanity also exists within God’s intimate and ontic relationship with humanity. However, the relationship of AI to humanity is noetic; AI knows humanity to the degree that its programmers do, or to the degree that its programmers have equipped it to look for certain domains of knowledge.<sup>43</sup> Second, and relatedly, the belief that AI could save us implies that AI supplies us with whatever we need for salvation. This suggests a salvation that is quantitative, meaning that to be saved is to have ameliorated a deficiency of something identifiable. However, theologically understood, salvation is not (merely) quantitative but is rather a qualitative transformation. This is perhaps best captured in one of the central New Testament terms for salvation, “reconciliation,” or *katallage* in the original Greek. Literally speaking, *katallage* is not merely a healing of enmity or difference as the English “reconciliation” may suggest, but rather implies a holistic transformation of all things unto the will of God.<sup>44</sup>

41. The theme of God’s personal knowledge of humanity is found throughout Scripture. An example: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it” (Ps 139: 1–6).

42. Chemist and philosopher Michael Polanyi, in his 1950–1951 Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen, denied the pure objectivity claimed by scientific positivism, claiming that undergirding all knowledge are commitments that emerge within personal relationships, such as with the universe, ideas, ideologies, communities, and other people. See the publication of these lectures in Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*.

43. In opposition to his friend Alan Turing and the proposition of AI, Polanyi did not believe that the human mind could be reduced to a set of data and rules. He believed that knowledge begins as “tacit” knowledge, not entirely in our awareness, that only gradually becomes focused into conscious knowledge. See Polanyi, *Tacit Dimension*.

44. For more on the biblical and theological understanding of reconciliation as God’s transformative work of salvation, see Langford, “Reconciliation as Holistic

## ESCHATOLOGY

The word “eschatology” comes from the Greek word *eschatos*, which means “last things,” and deals with topics that have to do, from a Christian standpoint, with things to come, including, for instance, death, the afterlife, and the end of time. It should be said that eschatology is, of course, speculative, since we are speaking of things that have not yet come to pass. In that sense, in many ways, eschatology might be understood as a Christian theology of hope, for it relies on promises that God has made that Christians look for God to fulfill.<sup>45</sup>

These promises are not only things to be realized in the future, but are also experienced in the present. If salvation has been brought about in the person and work of Jesus Christ, then this salvation is made real to us in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. We might say that salvation has *objectively* happened in the reconciliatory work of God in Christ; it occurred “there and then” and is complete. However, we might also say that salvation is *subjectively* happening in the redemptive work of God in the Holy Spirit; it occurs “here and now” and is still happening.<sup>46</sup> Thus it is that we are saved by the “two hands of God.”<sup>47</sup> The Holy Spirit is at work in the present making us more and more into the people that we already are in Christ.

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Redemptive Transformation.”

45. Jürgen Moltmann suggests that just as much as theology is “faith seeking understanding,” as goes the dictum of Anselm, so is it “hope seeking understanding.” “If it is hope that maintains and upholds faith and keeps it moving on, if it is hope that draws the believer into the life of love, then it will also be hope that is the mobilizing and driving force of faith’s thinking, of its knowledge of, and reflections on, human nature, history and society.” Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 33.

46. Barth speaks of this distinction: “When we say justification, sanctification and calling, on the one side, we are already expounding the relevance of what was done in Jesus Christ, but, on the other we are expounding only the objective relevance of it and not its subjective apprehension and acceptance in the world and by us men. We might say, we are dealing with the ascription but not the appropriation of the grace of Jesus Christ, or with what has taken place in Him for the world as such but not for the Christian in particular. In the Christian there is an appropriation of the grace of God ascribed to all men in Jesus Christ, a subjective apprehension of what has been done for the whole world in the happening of atonement. . . . In this connexion the specific point that we have to make is that the being and work of Jesus Christ—for even here we cannot abandon the christological basis—must now be understood as the being and work of His Holy Spirit, or His own spiritual being and work. The appropriation of the grace of Jesus Christ ascribed to us, the subjective apprehension of the reconciliation of the world with God made in Him, the existence of Christians, presupposes and includes within itself the presence, the gift and the reception, the work and accomplishment of His Holy Spirit.” Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 147–48.

47. This notion of the economy of God as worked out in the persons and work of the Son and the Spirit is seen in Irenaeus: “It was not angels, therefore, who made us,

However, we also see that we are not yet the people that we already are in Christ. As goes the famous dictum of Martin Luther, we are *simul iustus et peccator*, or “at one and the same time righteous and a sinner.”<sup>48</sup> This status of human existence is also true for cosmic existence, as reflected in perhaps the central topic of eschatology, that of the “kingdom of God,” a topic about which Jesus spoke extensively. The kingdom of God, or *basileia tou theou* in Greek, refers not to a place, such as heaven, but rather to a state of being, namely existence that accords to the will of God; for this reason, *basileia* is perhaps better translated as “reign” or “rule.”<sup>49</sup> At the time of Jesus, the Jewish people were already quite familiar with the notion of God as king and awaited the intervention of God, establishing divine rule over all creation.<sup>50</sup> Jesus proclaimed that this kingdom was coming, leading many to believe that the end of the world as they knew it was imminent. However, Jesus also proclaimed that the kingdom had already come in his own person and work.<sup>51</sup>

This duality of the kingdom of God as “already and not yet” is reflected in the notion of “inaugurated eschatology,” which states that, in Jesus Christ,

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nor who formed us, neither had angels power to make an image of God, nor any one else, except the Word of the Lord, nor any Power remotely distant from the Father of all things. For God did not stand in need of these [beings], in order to the accomplishing of what He had Himself determined with Himself beforehand should be done, as if He did not possess His own hands. For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things.” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.20.1.

48. Luther used this term in drawing a distinction between our justification in Christ and our sanctification in the Holy Spirit: “[Luther accounted] for the persistence of sin in believers, while at the same time accounting for the gradual transformation of the believer and the future elimination of that sin. Luther thus declared, in a famous phrase, that a believer is ‘at one and the same time righteous and a sinner’ (*simil iustus et peccator*); righteous in hope but a sinner in fact; righteous in the sight and through the promise of God yet a sinner in reality.” McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 340.

49. The notion of the kingdom of God as the actualization of the will of God thus establishes it as that for which we await while also as that which we may experience now, even if not yet completely. “The kingdom of God is that order of perfect peace, righteousness, justice, and love that God gives to the world. This gift is eschatological, for it comes in an ultimate way only at the renewal of the world consummated at Jesus’ return. But the power of the kingdom is already at work, for it breaks into the present from the future. Therefore, we can experience the kingdom in a partial yet vital manner en route to the great future day.” Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 22.

50. “The Christ event is not an isolated occurrence of a totally different kind, but is rooted in God’s history with Israel. The significance of Jesus can therefore be grasped only on the basis of the Old Testament history of promise.” Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 196.

51. See, for instance, Jesus’s words in the Synoptic Gospels: in Matthew, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:17); in Mark, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (1:15); and in Luke, “For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (17:21).

the kingdom has already been inaugurated, irrupting into our present while also serving as a foreshadowing of its eventual fulfillment.<sup>52</sup> In other words, in the person and work of Jesus, we see the will of God being done, the reign of God come in full. Yet, even in the time of Jesus and certainly ever since, we also see the will of God not being done and the reign of God not come in full, and await the time that Jesus will come again, as he promised, to establish the will of God for all people and for all time. However, just as the kingdom of God irrupted into the world two-thousand years ago in the person and work of Jesus, so the kingdom of God continues to irrupt into our present world in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Even now, we may taste and see the will of God around us; beauty and truth and justice and goodness happens, even amid that which militates against it.

Inaugurated eschatology has been, generally speaking, how the majority of historic and global Christianity has interpreted Jesus's instruction on the kingdom of God. However, there are two other understandings that have, at different times, found popular adherence. "Futurist eschatology" teaches that, from the time of Jesus, things have gotten worse and worse, and things will continue to devolve until that time when Jesus comes and establishes the kingdom of God. Conversely, "realized eschatology" teaches that Jesus gave us the tools to establish the kingdom of God, and that we are progressively building that kingdom as we live the way that God calls us to live.<sup>53</sup> Some critics would say that futurist eschatology denigrates the present work of the Holy Spirit in our midst, and that it excessively demonizes the world around us, one which God has made and loves. Other critics would say that realized eschatology eliminates the need for Jesus to come again, and that it is excessively optimistic concerning our ability to save ourselves from sin and accord the world to the will of God.

52. Theologian N. T. Wright speaks of the message of Jesus as one which was not merely hope for the future, but for the present as well. "What [Jesus] was promising for the future, and doing in that present, was not about saving souls for a disembodied eternity but rescuing people from the corruption and decay of the way the world presently is so they could enjoy, already in the present, that renewal of creation which is God's ultimate purpose—and so they could thus become colleagues and partners in that larger project." Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, 192.

53. Realized eschatology is usually first associated with biblical scholar Charles H. Dodd (1884–1973), who claimed that Jesus's preaching about the kingdom of God referred to something that was already happening, and that the kingdom was "realized" in the resurrection of Jesus. See Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching and Its Development*. However, in response to critics who said that he did not sufficiently account for Jesus's clear statements about a future kingdom, Dodd's later writings seem to suggest that he agreed that the kingdom had begun, but had not yet come in fullness. See McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 433.

The kingdom of God that Christians believe will ultimately come, prefigured now in the work of the Holy Spirit, is often called the “new creation.” This does not mean that the present creation will be destroyed or removed; God loves creation and deems it good. However, it is in “bondage to decay”<sup>54</sup> and in need of healing, thus it will be made new. This renewal of creation includes humans, of course, and the affirmation of God’s created reality means that human bodies will also be given new life. Christian theology asserts that humans are not merely some immaterial soul, as the Platonic dualists believed; rather, human bodies are central to who we are. God affirmed the value of material creation not only in the Genesis saga, but also in the incarnation, choosing to take on human flesh rather than merely sending another message through a prophet or another image through a mystic.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, if the resurrection of Jesus gives us a picture of perfected humanity, then we see that it features a physical body, even if that body is not precisely the same as our present bodies. This is perhaps noteworthy in light of those who claim AI will provide humanity with immortality by enabling us to upload our consciousness to artificial “bodies.”<sup>56</sup>

Some believe that AI will usher in the new creation on its own. Others believe that it will usher in the utter destruction of the world. It seems that these may be the latest versions of realized and futurist eschatologies, respectively. One of the things that Jesus makes clear is that the end of all things will happen on his timetable and not ours. Speaking to his disciples shortly before he is taken into custody to be executed, Jesus tells them, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But

54. “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:19–21).

55. The spiritualization of materiality leads not only to a degraded belief in the eternal value of the human body, but also to the belief that the earth itself lacks eternal value. “Such spiritualizing is simply not what the Bible teaches. God did not degrade himself in creating material things. He honored and dignified matter by bringing it into existence through his own power—and supremely by becoming incarnate within the material creation.” Snyder, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 45.

56. Philosopher Nick Bostrom defines transhumanism as “the intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.” Bostrom, “Transhumanist FAQ.” Transhumanists claim that AI and other technologies will extend human life, perhaps indefinitely, by such means as uploading memories and other brain states onto silicon, by replacing degrading biological body parts with artificial ones, or by merging human consciousness into virtual worlds. Notable transhumanists include Ray Kurzweil and Hans Moravec.

about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matt 24:35–36).<sup>57</sup> He likens this in-between time to the days of Noah, who did not know when the flood was coming. In the same way that Noah obeyed God and was a good steward of creation and technology, so does Jesus command his followers to stay awake and steward well.

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. (Matt 24:42–44)

Jesus’s words here highlight not only our responsibility to be faithful and wise in our creation and use of AI, but also of the urgency to do so.

Those who propose that AI will bring about the destruction of the world deny God the agency that is clearly reserved for God in Scripture and grant humanity an authority it does not have. Moreover, this orientation can deny the irrupting work of the Holy Spirit in creation, including in artificial creations such as AI. However, as we have noted, those who propose that AI will save the world also deny God agency. In addition, this orientation imagines the eschatological new creation in continuity to our current reality in the same way that salvation is imagined as merely a quantitative change. Rather, the new creation is qualitatively different, a transformation that AI is not equipped to provide, let alone define. When AI is depicted as ushering in any sort of utopia, not only is it denying God’s unknown means and timing, but it also depicts that utopia in terms of our present.<sup>58</sup>

57. Biblical scholar Douglas R. A. Hare notes that many people have attempted to predict when the end will come. “The spiritual arrogance that presumes to pry into God’s secret plan is roundly condemned by Matt. 24:36. Not even the Messiah knows when the end will occur! Not even the highest archangels are privy to the Father’s intention! How foolish is it for humans to think they can play with biblical numbers and ambiguous prophecies and discover what was hidden even from Jesus!” Hare, *Matthew*, 282.

58. Theologian Michael Burdett notes that fictional and philosophical depictions of utopias are often simply extensions of our present time, unlike biblical eschatological pronouncements that suggest a qualitatively different future. See Burdett, *Eschatology and the Technological Future*.

## CONCLUSION

The writings of those who have predicted that AI will bring about an end to the world as we know it—either as salvation or doomsday—have been called “apocalyptic AI.”<sup>59</sup> This “end” is usually signaled as happening soon after the future emergence of “AGI,” or artificial general intelligence.<sup>60</sup> While Christianity asserts that it is God, not humans nor their creation, who will determine the time and means of the new age, it is true that AI is “apocalyptic” in the true sense of the word. Apocalyptic literature, such as the biblical book of Revelation, is meant to be a presentation, often both vivid and ambiguous, of transcendent and ultimate truths; “apocalypse” literally means “unveiling.” In that sense, AI is apocalyptic in that it, at least, reveals to us our hopes and our fears, our capabilities and our limitations, our better angels and our hidden demons.

Perhaps the biggest thing that our creation, development, and use of AI has revealed to us is that, within our good creation, we continue to discover and build novel means to empower and extend our capabilities; in so doing, we create new things that may be participating in God’s work, but we do not determine the shape, nor are we the ultimate cause, of the kingdom of God. Some of our technologies, like AI, are uniquely powerful in their ability to bring about blessings and curses. Yet neither humanity nor its awesome tools are God, and the extent to which technologies participate in the eschatological inbreaking new creation is not always clear. It is the province of God to bring about the reign of God in times, places, and means that we do not dictate. Our task is to perceive what God has for us, and for it to change us. This is a task of theological knowledge, not scientific knowledge, and certainly not within the domain of that which we program

59. Religious studies scholar Robert M. Geraci defines apocalyptic AI as “a movement in popular science books that integrates the religious categories of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions with scientific predictions based upon current technological developments.” Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI*, 9.

60. Artificial general intelligence, sometimes called “strong AI,” is an AI that can do whatever human intelligence can do. “Most of the successes so far in AI have to do with building systems that do one thing that normally takes human intelligence to implement. However, on a more speculative side—certainly at the moment—there is great interest in the vastly more ambitious quest to build systems that can do all that human intelligence can do, that is, artificial general intelligence (AGI), which some think will surpass human intelligence within a relatively short time, certainly by 2084 or even earlier, according to some speculations. Some imagine that AGI, if we ever get there, will function as a god, while others, as a totalitarian despot.” Lennox, *2084*, 13–14. Some theorize that AGI will in turn create better and better AI that surpasses human intelligence, and perhaps it will even develop consciousness, a development called the “singularity.” This, of course, begs the question of what we mean by “intelligence.” See Boden, *AI*, 147–69.

into AI. Biblically speaking, “knowledge” is not merely a set of observable information, but it is rather a process of the mind, heart, and will, by which we become somehow aware of another reality to which we give ourselves. In other words, to know is to become transformed.<sup>61</sup> It is therefore at God’s initiative that we come to know as we are known; our knowledge is grounded in God’s knowledge, which we perceive only dimly.<sup>62</sup>

Ecclesiastes 1:9–10 reads: “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, ‘See, this is new’? It has already been, in the ages before us.” While it certainly true that there have been many “new” things, including AI, in the world, Ecclesiastes here speaks more existentially. The “Teacher,” credited as the author of Ecclesiastes, claims that humanity, in trying to find meaning in different things, ends up finding only “vanity of vanities” (Eccl 1:2). We still seek meaning today, perhaps in AI, but it is only God who ultimately bestows what we need, in shapes and ways known only to God. “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone” (Eccl 12:13). In seeking the reign of God first (Matt 6:33)—which may be mediated through AI!—we “fear God” and “keep his commandments,” and are then enabled to be, with humility, God’s vice-regents in our creation, development, and use of AI.

61. Barth notes that this sort of knowing is the result of the revelatory work of the Holy Spirit by which we are transformed. “We cannot impress upon ourselves too strongly that in the language of the Bible knowledge . . . does not mean the acquisition of neutral information, which can be expressed in statements, principles and systems, concerning a being which confronts man, nor does it mean the entry into passive contemplation of a being which exists beyond the phenomenal world. What it really means is the process or history in which man, certainly observing and thinking, using his senses, intelligence and imagination, but also his will, action and ‘heart,’ and therefore as whole man, becomes aware of another history which in the first instance encounters him as an alien history from without, and becomes aware of it in such a compelling way that he cannot be neutral towards it, but finds himself summoned to disclose and give himself to it in return, to direct himself according to the law which he encounters in it, to be taken up into its movement, in short, to demonstrate the acquaintance which he has been given with this other history in a corresponding alteration of his own being, action and conduct. We can and should say even more emphatically that knowledge in the biblical sense is the process in which the distant ‘object’ dissolves as it were, overcoming both its distance and its objectivity and coming to man as acting Subject, entering into the man who knows and subjecting him to this transformation.” Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 183–84.

62. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12).

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